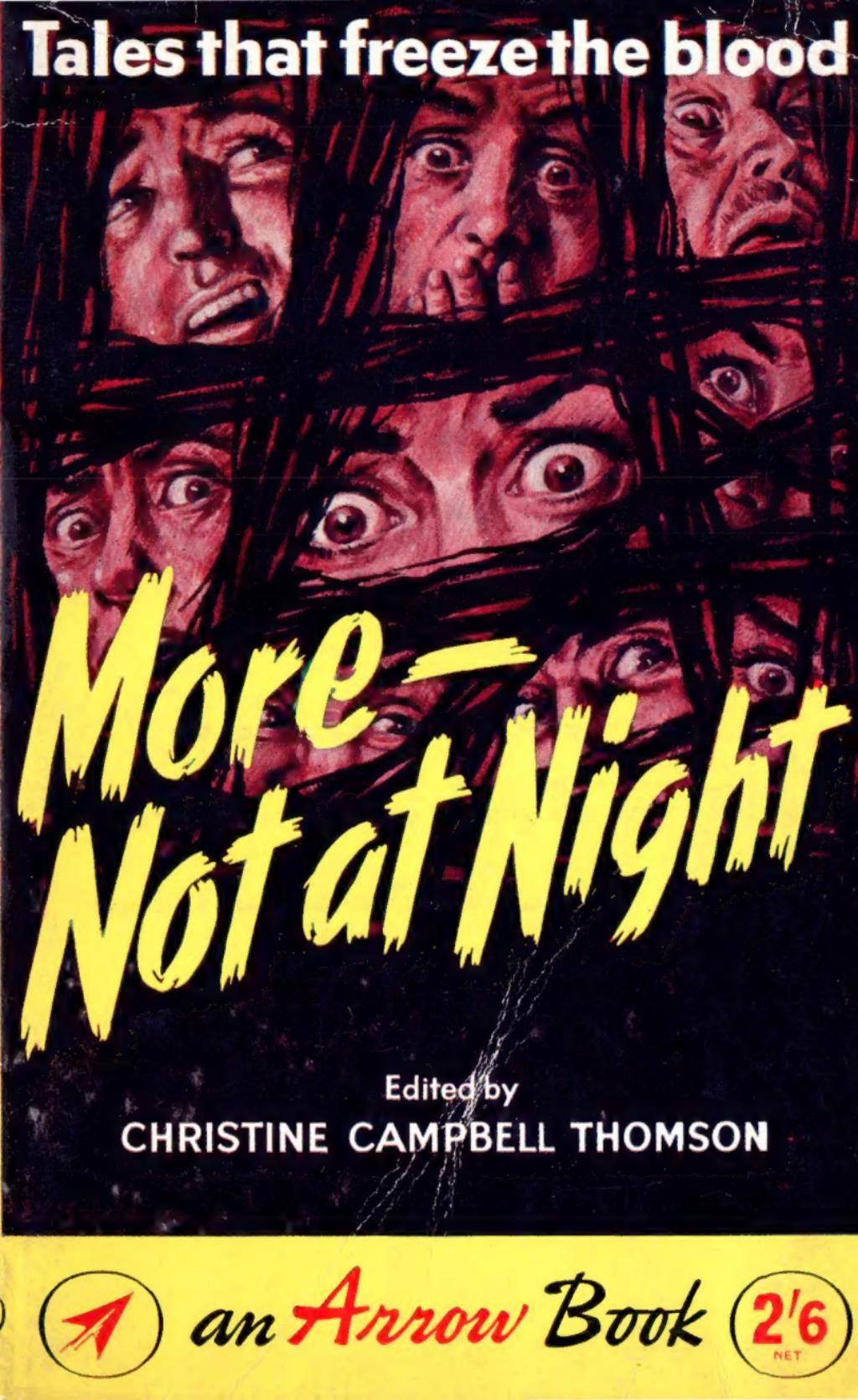


Tales that freeze the blood



More Not at Night

Edited by

CHRISTINE CAMPBELL THOMSON



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Edited by Christine Campbell Thomson

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amputations, snakes—they are all here!

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MORE NOT AT NIGHT

MORE NOT AT NIGHT

Selected and Arranged by
CHRISTINE CAMPBELL THOMSON



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INTRODUCTION

Before the first volume of the Arrow 'Not at Night' was officially on sale, the publishers were asking for a second. Nothing, of course, could be a more fitting tribute to the quality of the good old stories nor more pleasing to the editor.

Here, then, is the second collection from those long-ago favourites. Again, it has been a selection that proved difficult owing to the quality and claims of so many rivals. But the choice has been made on a basis of trying to find something for everyone; from the supernatural to the natural; from the realms of the gorgeous East to the modest homes of the Middle West of America. Here you have a collection which is honestly believed to be as good as the first one.

CHRISTINE CAMPBELL THOMSON

CONTENTS

THE CLOSED DOOR	Harold Ward
THE THIRD THUMBUPTINT	Mortimer Levitan
THE DEATH CRESCENTS OF KOTI	Romeo Poole
SWAMP HORROR	Will Smith & R. J. Robbins
GOLDEN LILIES	Oscar Cook
THE SEVEN LOCKED ROOM	J. D. Kerruish
CREEPING FINGERS	Loretta G. Burroughs
OUT OF THE EARTH	Flavia Richardson
THE MAN WHO WAS SAVED	B. W. Sliney
DORNER CORDAIANTHUS	Hester Holland
ROGUES IN THE HOUSE	Robert E. Howard
THE THING IN THE CELLAR	David H. Keller
THE CRACK	Oswell Blakeston
THE LAST TRIP	Archie Binns

THE CLOSED DOOR

HAROLD WARD

DYING, Obie Marsh cursed his wife as he had cursed her every day of their married life.

'You've poisoned me!' he gasped, writhing in agony. 'Yes, you've poisoned me, you she-devil!'

Lucinda, his wife, nodded dully.

'Yes, I poisoned you,' she answered without emotion. 'You are going to die anyway; the doctor said so. It's just a matter of time—maybe years, maybe months. And I can't stand this fightin' any longer. Fifteen years of it! fifteen years of hell!'

'Damn you!' Marsh snarled through his clenched teeth, his bearded face twitching as a spasm of pain shot through his vitals.

'We should never have got married,' the woman went on quietly, 'I never loved you and you never loved me. 'Twas a case of your folks and my folks stickin' in between us and the ones we loved. You always hated me 'cause of Lizzie Roper, an' God knows I wanted t'marry Al Sides. Just 'cause they wanted the farms joined, they made us get married, me an' you. Now we can't get a divorce 'cause of the Church, and I've just got sick of it all, Obie—sick of it all!'

'You hell-cat!' he gasped, his body twitching spasmodically.

'I got the idea of poisoning you when you first took sick,' she went on in the same even tones. 'Old Doc Plummer said that you might linger along for years. And I just couldn't stand it Obie—I just couldn't stand it any longer, your constant bullyin' and runnin' over me.'

'You'll hang for it! Marsh said huskily. 'I hope they torture you in hell——'

'Probably they will,' Lucinda Marsh answered without emotion. 'But it's worth it t'have a little peace here on earth. It hasn't been any heaven, livin' with you,'

Marsh twisted convulsively, his gnarled fingers closing and unclosing, his thick lips drooling. He pulled himself together with a mighty effort. He was a hard man and strong; hard men are difficult to kill.

'I'll come back . . . from th' grave, you hussy!' he gasped.

'——Waitin' for you——' he went on, trying to shake his fist in the woman's face.

The effort was too great. He dropped back upon the pillow again, the sweat standing out on his forehead in beads, his body shaking with spasms.

'God, it hurts!', he whispered. 'Just like . . . a knife!'

The woman suddenly lifted her head. She was listening.

'Somebody coming!' she muttered, moving swiftly to the window.

A roadster was entering the lane.

'It's old Doc Plummer,' she said, half to herself and half to the dying man. 'The old fool's earlier than usual. An' you c'n still talk.'

The man on the bed quivered. His fists clenched and his muscles tensed as he tried to drag himself back from the yawning pit that awaited him.

'——Getting . . . dark.'

'Doc's liable to re'nize th' symptoms.' the woman went on, as she heard the car come to a stop in the front yard. A sheet had been thrown carelessly across the foot of the bed. Seizing it, she wadded it into a bundle and pressed it against the face of the dying man. He fought against the stoppage of his breath with a feeble effort. She threw her whole strength against him. Suddenly his limbs straightened jerkily. She knew that he was dead, she sat up with a sigh of relief.

The outside screen door slammed shut. Leaping to her feet, she threw the sheet across the back of a chair and turned to meet the doctor.

'He just passed away in one of those spells,' she said without emotion. 'Come on him all of a sudden. Both th' kids are at school and I didn't have nobody to send for you. Taint no use to say I'm sorry, for I'm not. I'm glad he's dead.'

The physician shook his head sympathetically. Like all country practitioners, he was conversant with the family affairs of his patients. For a moment he stood looking down on the still form of Obie Marsh. Then he pulled a sheet over it and turned to the woman.

'Better sit down and take things easy, Mrs. Marsh,' he said, following her into the other room. 'I'll notify the undertaker and stop at the school and have the teacher send Mary and Jimmy home. Anybody else you want?'

She shook her head negatively.

'Tell Bill Reynolds t'come prepared t'take the body back with him,' she said slowly. 'This is my house now—mine. That's the way my pap and his pap fixed up th' deeds. An' the quicker I get him outen my sight, th'better it'll suit me. I never want t'see him again till th'day of the funeral, and I wouldn't 'tend that if it wasn't that people talk.'

'He made life hell for me,' she went on bitterly. 'I've hated him from th'day I married him. It's my house now and I'm goin't'lock that room as soon's they take him away. I never want t'see th'inside of it again. There's too many mem'ries hovering around it. I'd burn it to th'ground if it wasn't for burning th'rest of th'house.'

She dropped into a rocking chair and gazed at the doctor, her gaunt body quivering with unshed tears. The physician patted her on the shoulder sympathetically.

'You're overwrought, Lucinda,' he said kindly. 'overwrought and nervous. I'll fix up a tonic and bring it over to-night.'

'I don't need no tonic,' she responded. 'Knowin' he's a dead 'll be tonic enough for me.'

The physician wagged his head solemnly.

'Let's not speak ill of the dead,' he said. 'Everybody knows how he treated you. If there's nothing else I can do, I'll be getting along.'

In due time the undertaker and his assistant came with their

narrow wicker basket. Lucinda Marsh stood beside the door and waited for them as they carried their burden out. They looked at her queerly as she turned the key in the lock, then, removing it, placed it in her pocket.

'I hope t'God I'll never see th'inside of that room till my dying day,' she said.

Bill Reynolds, the undertaker, shook his head in agreement. He too knew the life she had led with Obie Marsh.

The passing years brought but little change in the outward appearance of Lucinda Marsh. Gaunt, hard-featured, tight-lipped and unemotional, she moved about the farm as of yore, doing a man's work in the field, adding to the dollars that were already in the bank, conducting her business along the lines to which she had been trained. She had never had friends; Obie Marsh had seen to that. She made none now.

Her children grew to manhood and womanhood. Little Mary married and moved to the adjoining town. Lucinda made no complaint and no comment. Jimmy took the place of the hired man, lifting a bit of the burden of labour from his mother's shoulders. But she still held the reins of management. Then he too married and brought his wife to the big gloomy old house at the end of the lane. Children came, six in quick succession. If their happy laughter wrought any change in the heart of the grim, silent old woman she never showed it. Emma, Jimmy's wife, busy rearing her brood, was content to remain in the background; Lucinda Marsh was still mistress of the house.

Through all the years that one room just off from the parlour—Father's room they called it—remained closed, the key hidden away in Lucinda's bureau drawer. It was never mentioned in the family circle. The children knew that there was something—some horrible taboo—that kept it from being talked about. Their childish imaginations did the rest. They passed it with bated breath; when darkness fell and shadows hovered outside the circle made by the big kerosene lamp on the centre table, they always played on the other side of the room, casting furtive glances toward the dark panels behind which lurked they knew not what.

Then with the passing of the years came the hard times. First

the grasshoppers destroyed the crops. Then came the drought. Prices went up; wages dropped; factories closed.

Mary was the first to feel the blow. The bank foreclosed on her husband's farm. Then came illness and another baby. Finally she was forced to come home with her sick husband and her little brood. Lucinda Marsh, as unemotional, as ever, made room for them. Jimmy's wife's brother lost his place in the city. Destitute, he appealed to his sister. She told her troubles to Lucinda Marsh.

'Four more won't make no difference at th'table,' the old woman said grimly. 'Write an' tell'em we'll make room for 'em somehow. God knows, though, where we'll sleep 'em.'

They were sitting at the supper table when this conversation took place. It was Mary who, with a quick glance at her brother, ventured to speak that which was in all their minds.

'Father's room,' she said timidly. 'Couldn't we open that up and air it before they come and let 'em sleep in there?'

For a moment there was an awed silence. Lucinda Marsh turned her sunken eyes on her daughter, then glanced at the faces of the others.

'I vowed that I'd never set foot in that room till my dyin' day,' she said finally.

'But they—they wouldn't be you, mother,' Mary argued. 'And we're cramped for room right now. Where else can we sleep 'em?'

Lucinda Marsh quietly laid down her knife and fork, her thin lips set in a straight, grim line.

'If anybody sleeps in that room, 'twill be me,' she said finally. 'I lived with your father for fifteen years, hatin' him every day more'n more. And he hated me worse'n I hated him—if such a thing is possible. The room's filled with our hatred—it's locked up in there smoulderin' an' ready to be fanned into flame again.'

'But, Mother——'

Lucinda Marsh straightened her bent old shoulders with a gesture of finality.

'I'll move into it,' she said grimly.

'I wish that I hadn't mentioned it,' Mary said regretfully.

'I knew that there was some sort of sentiment attached to it—but—'

The old woman cut her off. 'Sentiment? Hate, you mean?' she snapped. 'But maybe it's for th'best. I'm an old woman—way past seventy. I'm about due to die, anyway—'

She stopped, her aged eyes taking on a faraway look.

'Maybe it's foreordained,' she said, half to herself. 'He said that he'd be . . . waitin' for me. Maybe he is. Who knows?'

She rose from the table and took a step towards the door.

'I'll open it up in the mornin' and let it air out,' she said.

She moved up the stairway to the upper floor, her lips straight and tight.

For a long time Lucinda Marsh sat on the upright chair beside her bed, her weary eyes gazing into vacancy while the panorama of the years unfolded itself. To her had come a great urge, a desire which she had kept in leash for close to half a century—the longing that comes to all murderers—a yearning to visit the scene of the crime.

A thousand times before the same desire had swept over her and she had always fought it off. Now, however, with the fulfilment of her wish only a few hours away, there had come to her a seeming need for haste. The closed room was calling to her. Within her brain a voice was shrieking 'Now! Now!' To her aged mind it was the voice of the man she hated—the man she had killed.

Getting up she went to the bureau and opening the drawer, found the key where she had hidden it so many years before. She held it in her gnarled fingers, fondling it, crooning over it.

Her room was at the head of the stairs. One by one she heard the members of the household go to their rooms. Finally the gloomy old house was filled with an indescribable quietness.

Rising, she opened the door a tiny crack and peered out into the dark hallway. Satisfied that all were asleep, she picked up the small hand-lamp and tiptoed furtively down the creaking stairs.

A storm was in the air. She could hear the wind rising and shrieking through the branches of the trees. There was something reminiscent about its mournful wail. She stopped a

moment, her head bent forward. Then remembrance swept over her.

"'Twas like this the night—the night before he died,' she muttered to herself.

Her heart was beating a trifle faster as she reached the dark, grim door. She hesitated an instant. Then, transferring the lamp to her left hand, she inserted the key in the lock. It turned hard, as if reluctant to reveal the mysteries it hid. Then the tumblers shot back. For a moment she waited, her fingers on the knob. She was trembling now—shaking with an emotion she did not understand.

'He said that . . . he'd be . . . waitin' for me,' she murmured. 'I wonder—if he is.'

She turned the knob and pushed against the panel. The aged hinge squeaked protestingly. Then the door swung open. A wave of malignancy and hatred swept over her.

She stepped inside, her lips closed in a tight grim line. Just inside the door she waited, the lamp held high above her head, her eyes taking in every detail. There was the bed, unmade, where he had died. The thought came to her that Bill Reynolds, the undertaker, the last person to set foot in that room, was gone too. At the head of the bed was the little stand; on top of it was the glass in which she had administered the poison. Beside it was a bottle of medicine, half empty; the label, covered with old Doc Plummer's crabbed hieroglyphics, was yellow and faded. Doc Plummer . . . he too had been festering in his grave for years. There was the pillow where Obie's head had rested when he died; one corner was twisted where he had held it when the last spasm of agony had knifed its way through his vitals. Nothing was changed.

'He said that . . . he'd be waitin'—for me,' she said again.

The room was musty and mildewed, the dust of years over everything. She closed the door and set the lamp upon the little stand. Going to the window, she pushed it up to its full length. The wind swept in, howling and shrieking.

The lamp sputtered, causing queer grotesque shadows to dance in the distant corners. Across the back of the chair where she had thrown it years before was the yellowed sheet with

which she had smothered the dying breath out of her husband. There was a darker spot upon its mildewed surface; she knew it for the spittle that had drooled from his mouth.

She moved into the centre of the room, still peering furtively into the shadows.

'He said that he'd come . . . back from th'grave and be . . . waitin' for me,' she said again and again.

A fresh gust of wind howled through the window. The lamp sputtered, smoked, flared up, then went out.

With the sudden darkness came a feeling of dread. For the first time in her life, Lucinda Marsh was afraid.

Out of the darkness came a thing—a shapeless thing of white. It hung for a moment suspended in mid-air. It hovered over her, its long shapeless arms reaching out for her. The wind shrieked with merry gusto.

‘——said that he'd be waitin'——’ she murmured.

It swept over her, holding her in its folds, twisting about her, smothering her.

‘Ah-h——’ she screamed, clawing at the enveloping tentacles. ‘He kept his word . . . he was waitin’——’

In the morning they found her. Twisted about her head and throat was a yellowed sheet—the sheet with which she had smothered her husband.

THE THIRD THUMBPRINT

MORTIMER LEVITAN

THE persistent ringing of the door bell angered Professor Sanders; it brought to his lips words unscholarly and almost profane; it worried, disgusted and sickened him. Still, he let the bell ring, ring, ring . . . In his study, littered with papers of infinite variety and darkened by drawn blinds, he tramped to and fro. In a frenzied effort to defeat the clamouring bell, he held his hands tightly to his ears; but the odious sounds went through them, ignored them. The batteries were suffering too; already the vehement clangour had degenerated into buzzes and tinkles. Soon, very soon, the benevolent laws of physics would disarm the batteries and the bell would thenceforth be silent.

The ringing stopped. Professor Sanders fell into a chair, exhausted, desperately in need of calm reflection. The batteries, he meditated, would cost five shillings apiece; two of them would cost ten shillings—quite a sum; an electrician would have to install them. The inconsiderate reporters should be compelled to pay for them. Three short feeble buzzes—the Professor arose automatically. He could not understand why his reflections had ended so abruptly. He fumbled around for a reason. Somehow or other, that weak convulsion of the bell reminded him of something—something he had promised, something he must do, some engagement he must fulfil. Unconsciously he strolled to the front door, opened it absent-mindedly and admitted a dapper young man of twenty-two. Then he closed and locked the door.

‘I’ll appreciate this very much, Professor,’ said the visitor.
‘There’s something I ought to do,’ confided the professor.

'But I can't think what it is. The cursed bell rang three times and that reminded me of something, but I can't think what.'

'You promised to let me in when I gave that signal.'

'That's so! The professor was ingenuously surprised. I knew it was something. But you're in already! I opened the door without being aware of it. One of those barbaric reporters might have slipped in, and then—they're mischief makers, they are; there ought to be a law against them.'

The grey-haired, bespectacled full-bearded man would have forgotten the presence of the other, would have declaimed long and bitterly, had not Guy Steel interposed in friendly though selfish fashion.

'You can't blame the reporters. You've made history by your great work. The people are interested; they want to know more about you and the business of the reporters is to find out for them.'

'I don't care to have my name and my work flung about in your yellow newspapers. I'm satisfied to have the scientific journals treat the matter; and besides, my manuscript has not yet been sent to the publishers.'

The professor led the way to the study. Not that Guy Steel had need of guidance, however, for he had been in the study many times in his undergraduate days. A sort of protégé of the queer old pedagogue who lived a solitary life in a cottage, Guy had established a close intimacy (it was not really friendship) which gave him frequent access to the study. He was a shy man, was Professor Sanders, and few people possessed his confidence or friendship.

'Why have you the curtains drawn?' inquired the younger man.

'So those pests of reporters will think no one is at home. But those reporters don't think: they merely bother. Let's see—you're not a reporter, are you?'

'I'm in business. You know, Professor, I've heard so much about your wonderful work that I thought I'd presume again upon old friendship and come straight to headquarters to get material. I explained in my note; don't you remember?'

'Too bad. You would have made a scientist.'

'There must be business men as well as scientists. Besides, I shouldn't have the patience to work at a thing the way you do. How long did it take you to work out your system for the determination of criminals by thumb-prints?'

'Nineteen years—all the time I could spare from my teaching for nineteen years. I had to work for a living, my boy, or I'd have given my results to the world ten years ago.'

'Nineteen years! So that's what you've been doing with your spare time! We used to think you were making a new translation of Homer, or something of that sort. And so you've been grinding away on the greatest book of the century without any one knowing a thing about it!'

'Secrecy was essential. When a man begins work along channels that mark a radical departure from generally accepted notions, the scientific world laughs and scoffs. The derision of the public never touches a true scientist; it is the ridicule of fellow scientists that stings and discourages. Now you understand why I told no one—not even you—of my work.'

'How did you get the idea in the first place?'

'Two men formed the foundation—Galton and Lombroso.'

'Galton? Any relation to the eugenics man?'

'The same man. His really great work consisted in systematising the old observation that no two men have the same thumb-mark. Now, Lombroso, the great Italian anthropologist, showed the scientific world that external marks frequently determine criminality. The shape of a head will often show a murderer. But Lombroso didn't go far enough; he didn't produce a working system. All I did was to combine Galton and Lombroso. My work consisted in showing that the lines on the thumbs, which differ in each person, mean something, just as much as the shape of the skull. It took nineteen years, but I've succeeded. I've reduced Lombroso to a workable system on Galton lines. My system enables you to tell whether a man is a criminal merely by measuring and classifying his thumb-print. Moreover, you can determine what particular course the criminality will take. There is an infinite distinction between the print of a robber and of a murderer; you can easily detect the difference between a man who would commit arson and one

who would commit rape. You can tell the degree of cruelty to be used in the crime; whether the crime is to be committed with passion, cold blood, stealth or cunning.'

Neither spoke for a time. Each watched the other through eyes accustomed to the dim light of the study. The professor, who had given his account with rare enthusiasm, waited for questions; he expected no one to listen to the simplest lecture without asking questions—a habit acquired in the classroom.

'Aren't the thumbs the same in the child as when he grows up?'

'The designs on the thumbs never change.'

'Then you can tell whether a newborn baby is going to be a murderer?'

'As surely as you can tell its sex.'

'Well, I'm not going to let you see any of my thumb-prints.'

The professor removed his spectacles and toyed with them before answering.

'You'll find some of our best friends are murderers. Some haven't killed anyone as yet, to be sure, but they will in time, just as surely as an object thrown into the air will fall to the ground at a certain rate of speed. Psychological laws are as fixed as physical laws.'

'But there must be a chance of exceptions or mistakes.'

'None at all. A science that permits of exceptions or mistakes is no science.'

The professor stopped to emphasise the statement.

'I have succeeded in formulating a new science. I've studied the thumb-prints of ten thousand criminals and only one apparent exception did I find. He was an old man serving a life term for murder of the most brutal type; yet his thumb-print is that of an innocent man. I obtained all the records of his trial and found that the evidence against him was purely circumstantial. That man was innocent; and if it hadn't been for the dread of revealing my system prematurely, I would have taken up the matter with the governor. I might have freed the man, but it would have imperilled the system. My system is infallible.'

Steel smiled as he said, 'Of course, Professor Sanders, I believe every word you say, but it's rather hard to swallow.'

If you've really accomplished what you say, you've done the greatest work of the century. Why, it won't be possible for a guilty person to escape.'

'They might cut their thumbs off, but the absence of thumbs would be considered conclusive evidence of guilt after my system has supplanted the antiquated notions of criminal procedure now in vogue.'

Steel arose, walked over to the desk and nervously played with various articles scattered about, as he talked.

'Professor,' he began, from his newly assumed position, 'would you make a test for me? Suppose I bring you five or six thumb-prints, will you tell me whether their owners are criminals or not?'

'You demand final proof? Well, I can scarcely object, even though it hurts my vanity. You bring me the prints and I'll convert even you.'

The doorbell rang, not clamorously as an hour ago, but persistently.

'There they go again,' lamented Sanders.

'Why don't you disconnect the bell if the ringing annoys you?'

'That is a good suggestion. How does one accomplish it?'

'I'll do it for you,' volunteered Steel, starting for the tiny kitchen where the disconsolate bell was fastened to the wall.

'I'll show you where——'

Sanders stopped short and fumbled around his desk. He ran his hands through all his pockets and then searched blindly over the surface of the desk.

'I can't find them,' he murmured to himself.

'What's the trouble?' asked Steel when he returned from the kitchen.

'It's no use; I can't find them. I put them somewhere——'

'Your glasses?'

'I know I had them a few seconds ago.'

'Shall I pull up the blinds?'

'No, no! Those reporters would probably grin through the windows like a pack of wolves at a lamb. I can see them licking

their reportorial chops now, ready to pounce on me and tear me asunder.'

'They won't see the light if I turn it on.'

'Don't turn on the light! I can't see a foot away without my glasses, but I'd rather be blind than have those reporters get me.'

'I'll look, but I can't see much here.'

Steel searched the room—on the desk and under the desk—on chairs, under books—but the glasses remained unfound.

'Never mind,' sighed Sanders. 'If I don't find them myself, Mrs. Jones will find them in the morning. She always finds everything.'

'As you say. Well, I'll have to be going now. I'll come back to-morrow with the prints. Thanks very much for the interview.'

'The back door! for the sake of things scientific, take the back door!' shouted the professor when he heard Steel advancing to the front door.

Holding the young man's arm, the professor shuffled into the kitchen, blindly felt for the key, opened the door and fairly shoved his visitor out, such was his haste to gain the safety of locked doors. He feared lest some one of the enemy, more skilled and adventurous than the rest, might cross the threshold with a single foot and thus effect an entrance. Luckily no such calamity occurred. He groped his way back into the study and there renewed his search for the delinquent spectacles. It was a long search, exasperating, futile. Touch, with the questionable aid of extremely near-sighted eyes, revealed no clue. The bewildered Professor paced aimlessly about the room until he was thrown prostrate on the floor by a chair. He made no attempt to rise; but every now and then he would vaguely make the rounds of all his pockets. Wretched with despair, rendered helpless and useless by ineffective vision, he reconciled himself to the separation from his spectacles until morning, when Mrs. Jones, who put his house in order each day, would assuredly find them. Until then, however, he must suffer; he must refrain from work; he must simply think.

At eight o'clock the next morning there came three loud

knocks on the door. Professor Sanders painfully picked himself up, stumbled across to the front door and opened it.

‘Guy, is that you?’

‘Good morning, Professor,’ was the cordial reply. ‘Have you found your glasses?’

‘Found them? No. The housekeeper will doubtless find them when she gets here.’

‘Well, that’s too bad,’ sympathised Guy Steel as he locked the door behind him. ‘Have you looked all over?’

‘I’ve felt all over.’

They moved towards the study, Steel holding to Sanders’ arm and gently pushing him along.

‘Let’s give one last good search,’ suggested Guy, as he energetically started to peep into all possible and impossible corners.

‘It won’t do any good,’ was the pessimistic rejoinder. ‘I ought to have an extra pair of spectacles but I could never afford them.’

‘Now you’ll soon be able to afford several hundred pairs.’

The young man was feeling along the floor between the desk and the wall. Triumphantly he announced, ‘But you won’t need any extra. Here they are.’

Tears were in the old man’s eyes as he wiped the lenses with his handkerchief. He put on the spectacles and gazed at the youth before him.

‘Thanks, my boy. It’s like coming back to life to get these glasses. You can never know how nearly dead I feel when I can’t read, can’t write, can’t see. I really am partially dead. I’m glad you came; I’m glad you came.’

‘I’m glad I came, too. Now that you’ve found your glasses we can make the tests you promised me.’

‘Tests I promised you?’

‘Yes, don’t you remember? You said you’d tell me the character of the owners of five or six thumb-prints; and I’ve got five of them here.’

‘Where are they? I’ll do them immediately.’

Sanders sat down at his desk, turned on the light and laid out a variety of instruments.

'Don't you think I'd better pull up the shades?' inquired Steel as he placed a strip of rough paper containing the reproductions of five thumb-prints on the desk.

'No! no! Those reporters may still be hovering about.'

Sanders looked at the paper before him. He was puzzled.

'These aren't on smoked paper. Smoke the paper, press your thumb on it and run through shellac—you know how.'

'These were made that way—but I had plates made. It's going to work just the same.'

Professor Sanders was doubtful as to the adequacy of the prints but he was willing to try them. He set to work, measuring. Angles, curves, relations, lengths—all had to be determined and recorded. For two solid hours he kept his attention riveted on the prints; and during these hours not a word was spoken. Mrs. Jones, bent on straightening the study, was shooed away by Steel, who spent the time tiptoeing about the room or gazing over Sanders' shoulders. Finally the measurements were complete.

Referring to a mass of unbound sheets that rested to one side of the desk, the Professor explained, 'Here is the manuscript of my book, *The Determination of Criminals*. By referring to the charts I have prepared, everything becomes clear. It is merely a matter of classification from now on. Let's take No. 1 first.'

He turned to several charts and trailed the particular combination of measurements to its class.

'No 1 is an innocent man. He will never commit any crime of violence. He will commit only those acts of petty thievery to which all mankind is addicted. No. 2.'

Again he went through the routine of classification.

'No. 2—the same as No. 1. Now we'll take No. 3 . . . No. 3 is a murderer—a cold-blooded murderer, who will kill for logical reasons.'

Steel, who had jotted down the verdicts in the first two cases, recorded nothing for No. 3. He asked 'You're sure this is No. 3 you're talking about?'

'That is the one.'

'You probably got them mixed.'

'Don't dare to say that a man of my age and experience could

get mixed in such a simple operation. Now I don't mean that this man has already committed murder; I merely mean that he either has or will.'

'But it can't be.'

'Why can't it be?' demanded Sanders. 'Everything can be. You know the man?'

'Yes.'

'And you think his reputation such that he can't ever become a murderer?'

'I know he's as innocent and peaceful a man as ever lived.'

'Still, he has killed a human being in cold blood, or will in the future.'

'But he—why, Professor Sanders, it's absolutely silly! This man is—why—'

He ended in a laugh.

'I'm sorry if I've exposed one of your friends. Such is the penalty we pay for scientific certainty.'

'Well, if there's any certainty in this world it's absolutely certain that No. 3 is not a criminal and never will be.'

'Who then is the man in whose outward appearance you place more faith than in scientific truth?'

'You.'

Professor Sanders looked at Guy Steel for a moment; he had heard the single word but had not grasped its significance.

'I?' he questioned calmly, with tragic simplicity.

'Oh, Professor, it's all foolishness.'

'That was my thumb-print?'

'Yes; but—'

'There may have been some mistake, but I think not. It has never occurred to me to try my methods on myself. To be certain, let us try again. I'll take the print on smoked paper to be sure.'

The professor walked over to the table that stretched along an entire wall, upon which divers instruments of the psychology laboratory rested, attached a strip of prepared paper to the drum, lit the three gas jets, that sent blackening flames upon the paper, revolved the drum and soon had the proper coating of soot. He detached the paper and pressed his thumb on a corner.

He did not put the print into shellac, to make it permanent, nor did he wash the smutch from this thumb, but set to work immediately with the measurements.

While Sanders worked serenely on, Steel stood behind him, apparently fixed to the spot. The necessary data were collected. The Professor turned to his ponderous manuscript. Both men breathed in long-separated gasps while Sanders classified the print.

And then the Professor took a deep breath, placed the manuscript to one side and quietly announced, 'There was no mistake.'

'Oh, well, every system has some exceptions.'

'My system is infallible. There are no exceptions.'

'I'm in for it, now,' confided Steel. 'You see, I had those five thumb-prints published in last evening's paper; and we announced that you would give the readings.'

'Published? Why?'

'Well, Professor, I might as well confess that I'm a reporter and published the entire interview.'

'You said you were in business.'

'I knew you wouldn't give me the interview if I told you the truth.'

'I don't understand why you did that.'

The Professor meditated for a few minutes before continuing, 'You say you promised to print the results in your yellow sheet?'

'I'll fake readings for you and Nos. 4 and 5.'

'That's true. I've not finished the last two.'

He referred to his charts again, performed the necessary classification and announced, 'No. 4 is a thief—cunning, deliberate, daring. No. 5 is a half-witted murderer—kills for no reason at all.'

'Thanks ever so much,' said Steel, as he put his notebook and pencil away.

'You published the names under the prints?'

'Yes; the names were published last evening. There's something to your system, for the last two men have just been convicted of the crimes you charged them with, and the first

two are prominent business men. I'll fake a reading for you, Professor, unless you give me a more truthful one.'

Instantly the old man arose, his voice and temper raised to the highest pitch.

'Fake a reading!' he exclaimed. 'You publish the results as I gave them to you.'

'I couldn't do that. It would make you out either a murderer or a faker.'

'You've told the public I'd report on five thumb-prints. Young man, it is your plain duty to give the public my reports as I gave them to you.'

'But don't you see what that would mean to you?'

'I understand; but personalities cannot stand in the way of duties. Now, Mr. Steel, farewell. I must think.'

Guy Steel slowly went out of the room and into the open. No click of the lock followed his departure.

Professor Sanders sat at his desk and thought. He ate no breakfast, no lunch; indeed he was unconscious of the coming and passing of the mid-day hours. He thought of the nineteen years of constant labour on a single idea, of the endless days and nights spent in collecting, classifying and analysing material for his one great work. He had gained little of that seductive publicity that the world confuses with success, but he cared not for the fame of life; he wanted the fame that lasts through all eternity. He sought for the imperishable glory that belongs to him who adds to the store of human knowledge.

Nineteen years—and then success! He had nursed a chance idea into a marvellous science. He had reduced the investigations of nearly two decades into the bounds of a single volume. Although the book had not been sent to the publishers (it would be sent in a few days) the scientific men all over the world were attacking it, defending it, discussing it. Scholar and layman alike awaited the appearance of the book—the general expectation was the immediate result of a single announcement. Sanders had made this to one of his fellow teachers. The newspapers had somehow learned of the startling discoveries, had informed the public and then sought to satisfy with imaginative interviews the curiosity they had aroused. Fame had burst upon

Professor Sanders. Already life promised to be easier for him; the college had raised his salary; the royalties from his book would doubtless be of dignified dimensions, magazines would offer astonishing sums for authentic articles on the new science. In some slight measure he would be recompensed for the meagre years just ended. Instead of being the withered hermit, he would be the feted scholar. Fame, pleasant and satisfying, would be his while alive; and unending fame would be his after death.

His mind wandered back to the incident of the morning. He, Professor Sanders, the originator of the system of determining criminality from thumb-prints, was a murderer—that might be; after all, an individual is not master of his fate. If the world would consider him a murderer, Sanders would be satisfied; but the world would not consider him a criminal; it would say with sneers and laughter: 'Ah, a wonderful system! The only trouble is that it fails when applied to his originator!' This would bring the entire system into disrepute, would cause hilarity at the expense of the pedagogue who had foolishly wasted his life erecting the framework of a science that tumbled down when subjected to a final test. The scientific world would smile a knowing smile and then pass its learned attention to other matters. Professor Sanders would be forgotten by every one except the humorists. He winced at the thought; it was more than he could bear. He had wanted eternal fame and had been only too glad to sacrifice all in life to gain it. And now—well, now that he seemed on the point of success, when all his fondest hopes and dreams were almost realised, utter failure blackened all the future.

'How are you this afternoon, Professor?'

The words startled; they shattered a train of thoughts like a stroke of lightning.

'I thought you had gone home, Guy?'

'I just came back. You didn't answer the door so I walked right in. I came back to apologise for the dirty trick I played on you.'

'Never mind. As long as I did not know you were a reporter I did not mind talking to you.'

'But I mean for taking your glasses.'

'You found my glasses; you did not take them.'

'I'm ashamed, but I took them. It occurred to me in an unfortunate moment that it would be a good joke to try your system on yourself. You were playing with your glasses and I just took a long chance that your thumb-mark would be on them. I managed to pick them up from your desk and get away with them. The lines of your thumb were there all right and I had them copied; and this morning I made believe that I found your glasses on the floor.'

He looked downward, repentant, thoroughly sorry for his misdeed.

'I know you won't forgive me, but——'

Professor Sanders did not answer at once. He looked at the young man before him—the youth he had taken a liking to as an undergraduate, the man whose visit he had enjoyed the day before. A smile—the vaguest trace of a smile—lit up his face as he languidly spoke,

'When you took my spectacles yesterday, you cast me among the dead for many hours during the period of fame. My partial death served your purpose; your complete death will serve mine.'

He took a revolver from a lower drawer, an old-fashioned weapon that belonged to past generations, and pointed it at Steel. Guy stood speechless, strengthless, thoughtless.

'The system demands as final proof that I shall be a murderer. Forces beyond my control require that I kill someone. You, my lad, have caused me more misery than any one else. It is only logical, therefore, that I should kill you.'

'God!' screamed Guy Steel, finally regaining the use of his voice; but he said nothing more.

The bullet entered his heart and he fell over without even a moan. Professor Sanders took one look at the dead man, walked to the front door, opened it, and shouted to all the world:

'MURDER!'

THE DEATH CRESCENTS OF KOTI

ROMEO POOLE

OUR preparations for sleep in the tropical night having been completed, Dr. Seego stood back and surveyed his invention with pardonable pride. Out of slender bars of angle steel made for the purpose, he had fashioned a cage near the top of a big hardwood tree, a shelter large enough to support two folding cots, one on each side of the tree trunk, and furnished with a steel ladder in lieu of a stairway. When the panels of fine screen were set in place we had a sleeping gallery proof against all animals, insects and birds and high enough above the ground to be cool and airy.

'Bugs may come and bugs may go,' commented the doctor, 'but we'll be as safe in that conning tower as a dollar in the U.S. Mint.'

'Unless,' joked Mark Frissian, 'Some of your friend Siwaloo's devils come to visit you.'

'I'll take a chance on any scrub South Pacific devil opening that Yale lock,' responded the doctor.

'Who's sharing your tree-top nest to-night, Doc?' asked Frissian, without any showing of envy.

'Mace was the first applicant.'

Frissian turned to me. 'You've got the makings of a real explorer in you,' he said jovially. 'I'm not afraid, but I'll take my chances on a good night's sleep aboard the *Magpie* the first night. If you fellows find it so delightful here after a trial, we can set up more bird cages to-morrow.' And he and Phelan, with the two black labourers, returned to the boat landing.

Dr. Seego had conceived this expedition to Koti Island to

observe the odd race of Polynesian savage who inhabited the place. Having been here previously himself, he knew the lie of the land, and boasted a personal acquaintance with old Siwaloo, chief of the colony. The uncanny resemblance between all Polynesian languages made it easy for the doctor to master the dialect of Koti and he held a long conference with the aged chief promptly upon landing.

When we two had ascended to our screened dwelling that night, Seego drew the steel ladder up until the bottom was out of reach of the ground. Noting my surprise, the doctor explained.

'Frissian tried to kid us about the devils on the island,' he said, 'but he didn't know there was more truth than poetry in his suggestion. When I last saw this place four years ago there were nearly twenty-five hundred people here; to-day, old Siwaloo tells me, his colony numbers a scant hundred and fifty.'

'The result of disease,' I suggested.

'Apparently not. The people are being killed off by some agency they don't understand; and I'll have to confess that at present I don't understand it either. You've noticed that this cliff we are on is roughly V-shaped. The inside of the V is all rock formation and the people live in caves, partly natural and partly chiselled in the face of the cliffs. The only approach to these caves is by the trail we came up. You noticed, of course, that it winds back and forth from level to level, giving access to all the cliff dwellings, and it is guarded every night. Yet something manages to elude the guards, get into caves far up the cliff, and inflict fatal injuries on the occupants. Lately this plague has fallen on so many of the men, especially the young men, that there are few left alive in the colony.'

'Aren't the victims able to explain what has happened?' I asked.

'They are usually delirious or dead when discovered. I haven't had time to go over the case thoroughly with Siwaloo, but so far it has me baffled about as completely as it has him. We'll get the whole story to-morrow and see what we can do for the old man.'

We smoked in silence for a few minutes, the sparse jungle

around us being almost devoid of animal life, when there came a distinct vibration in our tree as if a weight had landed against it. We strained our ears for a sound, and at last there came a furtive scratching and the faintest rustling like a rubber rain-coat as the thing climbed upwards towards us. The trap-door through which we had entered was closed beneath our feet, and the doctor, anxious for a look at the would-be intruder, stooped to open it. At the first click of the latch, however, the thing abruptly ceased to scratch, and only the faint, sudden vibration of the tree told us that it had leaped without pausing to study the consequences. We never heard it alight. A flock of sleepy birds in the nearest tree, some fifty yards away, stirred themselves and squawked plaintively and then all was silent.

This incident, with its mysterious ending, gave both of us plenty of food for shuddering reflection. There was no nearby tree to which a thing of that evident size could have leaped; yet it hadn't dropped. Was it a huge bird? Birds do not alight low on a tree and climb, especially into a strange nest with a human scent. A monkey? No monkey could have landed silently from so high a jump.

My sleep was much troubled by visions of creeping monsters that came through the walls of our shelter, and I was impatient as a child to hear the savages' description of their mysterious enemy, which we got the next forenoon.

'There is a tradition of my fathers,' said the venerable Siwaloo, stroking his long white beard, 'that the other part of this land, around yonder ancient volcano across the river, was once inhabited by a puny race of people not like ourselves. They neither ate, nor drank, nor slept as we did. They were smaller than our people, and not good fighters with spear or knife. In short, we could not enjoy any kind of companionship with these weaklings.'

'As it was not a pleasure to continue fighting year after year with these people, and as we did not want their wives or other possessions, my fathers destroyed their spindling race, as we would do to-day in a like case. If one is to live in Koti, either he must be strong to take care of himself with a club and spear,

or he must be pleasing or useful. My fathers killed all these brown-skinned people because they were neither.

'So far, all was right. But now that a scourge has come upon us, we can only say that these worthless pests have returned from the dark world as devils seeking to destroy our good race.

'My people can deal with snakes, with monkeys, with tigers if need be, but we know not the way of devils, and we are helpless. Perhaps they go through the solid rock, or make themselves unseen to our sentries. We guard our trail; yet they go where they will on that same trail to do their killing. We fasten our doors with staves and thongs blessed by all the gods, and they are found open, with death inside. If the wise Americans know aught of the ways of devils, and can drive out this curse, we will repay them well in any such goods as we have, especially wives, of which we have now far too many for the remaining men.'

'Chief Siwaloo,' replied the doctor, 'could not these things climb to the top of your cliff and descend by ropes to your doors, there to do their work, and then go either up or down on the same ropes?'

'The cliff,' said the chief, 'cannot be climbed by anything living except at one or two points, and those are closely guarded day and night. The broad wall that faces the sea is covered with small bush, but not my hardest soldier will try to climb it to-day although hundreds have tried in other years. The cliff is of soft rock, that cracks off in great flat pieces like the scales of fish. The little green bushes feed on the wet surface and having no long roots they will not support the weight of half a man. So, even if one were small enough to trust his weight to these little bushes, somewhere up the bluff the rock must give way, and death be the answer. That side guards itself, my friend.'

'And there have been no ropes. There is a scream in the night. Two minutes are gone before the nearest of us can get out to look and nothing is to be seen. If there were ropes, someone above or below must see them in front of his door, but there is nothing.'

'The victims rave about a devil in a long flapping coat going out of the door. Perhaps they see something—perhaps it is only

their idea of a devil, learned from white sailors. I do not know. Surely no man would wear a long cloak in Koti. Nor would a man leave the sign of the three half-moons on every victim.

'If you doubt my belief in devils, sir, Americans, but follow me and you shall see the latest victim, whose body is not yet given to the ground.'

We went with him into the vault-like cave where the body of the lost warrior lay in state. On the cheek were three crescent-shaped marks, each probably half an inch long, the concave sides of the crescents facing each other. The cuts had been badly infected, and in any one but a savage death might have resulted from the filth alone. The victims, Siwaloo told us, had all been marked exactly alike. On some exposed part of the face or body there always appeared three little crescent-shaped marks, and the strongest victim rarely lived longer than sunrise after a night attack.

'Yonder old volcano,' warned the chief as we were leaving him, 'is a place of strange things. My people have thought that these devils might dwell there and they have tried to hunt them out, seeking in the dark, save at the mountain's base. They never found anything alive, but even so they returned sickened, and some of them died within a day or two.'

'Such was all the success we had in the back cave, and as for the old crater itself, we think it is the home of the king of all the devils. The inside walls of the crater are much the same as the face of this cliff and they cannot be scaled safely. My men dread to go near its edge for fear of spells, although the bravest have ventured there at times without learning anything. Strange cries seem to come from far down in the crater, and our goats and dogs that have prowled too near its edge at night have disappeared, not to return. My white friends must be protected by most powerful gods if they would go near the volcano at either top or bottom, or you will never return.'

There was a suggestion from Phelan that some of us might take a turn at watchman duty upon the face of the cliff, but the doctor vetoed it. 'We would be just as helpless as old Siwaloo is, or more so,' he said. 'The trouble comes only on dark nights and we might see something if we had our search-

light thrown on the cliff at the right time. The weather is clear now and they won't be bothered to-night. To-morrow we will have a look at the cave that troubles our black friend so.'

The principal barrier that prevented Siwaloo's people from exploring that fearful cave seemed to be that it was dark and they had no lights except crude fish-oil lanterns or pine-knots which the draught through the cave soon blew out. Hence, when the four of us, Dr. Seego, Phelan, Frissian and I entered the place we were armed with a storage battery and a 250-watt electric light.

The bottom of the cave was virtually all rock, but at intervals there were black mouldy pools of mud, emitting a vile odour.

'Here,' said Seego, 'is probably where our bare-footed friends from across the river met their fate. Poking around here in the dark they could easily get scratched and skinned, and if I'm not mistaken that mud is dangerous.' And he took up a sample in a little bottle.

From the first we had been conscious of a noise that seemed too loud to be caused by the wind; and after a twenty-minute climb up a well-worn trail on the rock bottom, we came out upon the edge of an underground stream that roared through the rocky cavern like a freight train through a tunnel. The cave at this point opened into a large space, probably forty or fifty feet high above the surface of the water, and although there was apparently no way of crossing the stream there was plentiful evidence of human workmanship in the subterranean cavern.

Crude scaffolds had been built up the rocky walls on each side of the stream so that one could climb high above the water. These structures were of sticks not much larger than a broom-stick, and were put together in the most crude and awkward ways. They were not strong enough to hold the weight of one grown man at any point, yet every stick was worn on the top as if from continual climbing up the framework.

Here was work beyond the intelligence of any known animal — yet not strong enough for human use. What could the answer be? Did men labour to make a climbing place for monkeys? And how did anything cross that stream to do the same work on the other side?

We sought for a long time for some means of proceeding, but as none became apparent the doctor decided to come again and bring steel material from the ship with which to construct some sort of bridge.

On board the *Magpie Seego* analysed the mud from the cave. After half an hour's work he came out on deck where Frissian and the rest of us were planning the bridge work.

'Anything in the mud?' hailed Frissian.

'Plenty. Arsenic, antimony, sulphate of mercury from the rocks, bacteria enough to pollute the Pacific Ocean and traces of picrotoxin from coccus berries, which must have been carried in from the outside. Nature did her worst on that mud, and whoever finished the job certainly was thorough.'

Four of us were now using the 'bird cages' for sleeping, on account of their coolness, and as we threaded our way up the path to the top of the cliff old Siwaloo came out of his royal cave-dwelling with much trouble written in his wrinkled face, inquiring if we had made any progress against the mysterious killers.

'We know little as yet, friend Siwaloo,' replied the doctor, speaking the native dialect, 'but I believe I can overcome the poison of these devils. In three days, or four perhaps, we may find their stronghold and try other means upon them. So, if the weather remains cloudless, as now, your colony may not suffer another single loss.'

'Clear weather the gods are giving us,' said Siwaloo, 'but your goodness has not reckoned with yonder smoke.' He pointed across the river toward a small volcanic hill beyond the one which we had explored. A thin stream of smoke drifted upward from its summit and the slow but steady wind brought it across the land, so that the sky was somewhat darkened.

'The smoke has always been with us,' explained the old chief, 'and we have given it no notice, any more than a thunder-storm or a summer rain, for the hill does nothing but smoke. But now when the wind comes this way, it makes dark nights for the three moon devils to work in, that is why we dread to see the smoke coming. By the end of another watch the moon will be hidden—and—death may come amongst us again.'

Seego pondered this a long time. 'Chief Siwaloo, is there any one family more likely to be attacked than others?'

'Yes. It has always been the way of my people for the warriors to decorate the doors of their caves with the teeth of wild animals. This is an honour to our gods, and we cannot stop it, even though it guide those demons who come to destroy us. A warrior of Koti would rather die than forgo this sign of his bravery. And it seems that the three-moon things notice these signs, for they always strike at my best fighters.'

'The four brothers Banota were good fighters and brave, hence they had the largest animal teeth and the most of them. Half a year ago the devils singled them out for death, and now there is only one Banota. And with every dark night—who knows what may happen to him? Every family of fighting men has suffered the same way until today I am king of a colony of women and almost without an army.'

At this Seego lapsed into English, shutting out Siwaloo from the conversation and briefly translated for us.

'Boys, you can all see as well as I can the kind of intelligence that is doing this killing, or directing it. How they get here or how they escape is another story, but no animal ever read the signs on the cave doors, nor cared whether it killed men or women. Whoever does this is interested in making the colony powerless; hence their preference for fighting men.'

'I'd like to know more about these spooky things, what they are and how they work, before I come to loggerheads with them. But on the contrary there are reasons why I'd like to trap some of them to-night, if it can be done. I hate to see Siwaloo's people wiped out off the earth without a chance to save themselves; and half a dozen of his men may be killed to-night. In the second place, it's an absolute certainty that the killers are not armed with guns or any civilised weapons, and they can't be in the least dangerous beyond the reach of their claws. We know to a certainty that they use mud out of the cave for poison, and if the worst comes to the worst, I believe I could save a victim after he had been attacked.'

'Well, what's the idea, Doc?' asked Frissian. 'Do you propose for one of us to go and sleep with the last of the Banotas?'

'You're a rotten humorist, Mark,' commented the doctor. 'No, I don't think brother Banota's cave is any place for safe and sound sleeping on dark nights. But I am game to fix up a net of fine cables and lay for the midnight callers, wherever Siwaloo thinks they may drop in. What do you say?'

'Doc,' replied Frissian, 'in the eighteen years we've followed this gentle game I don't believe you can look back and recall a time when I've baulked at anything because it was dangerous. But I don't believe we're prepared to make a success of your idea tonight. It's late, and we'd have to plan our trap as well as make it, and I don't think we ought to tackle the job.'

'On the contrary,' said Seego, 'I've done most of the engineering in my head already. It's nothing but an extra-strong monkey snare. And we'll have a big light in the cave to keep the thing from surprising us.'

In the end, of course, the indomitable Swedish doctor had his way, and we scurried about as fast as possible to bring up the materials from the ship.

Long before the witching hour arrived, we had fitted out three of the best-decorated caves with nets of fine steel cable, hung so that they could be dropped quickly, and so arranged that should we capture any catlike monstrosity we could keep aloof from its claws and teeth. We also had lights, wired to substantial batteries, which the islanders feared only a little less than the three-moon devils.

The last of the Banotas pleaded for a chance to be in at the finish. He was marked for death, he said, and it was his ambition to die fighting. Seego had no objections except the fear that the gallant Banota might get excited and hurt someone in the case of a capture. However, he finally extracted a promise from the warrior not to do anything rash, and we all assumed our appointed places.

The soldiers' caves were all large, as befits prominent men, and we had ample room to stretch out and await what might happen. Dr. Seego and I, with Banota and a black deck-hand from the yacht, took up the vigil in Banota's cave, while Frissian and Phelan made their ambush in another. A third cave had a net with an automatic trap and alarm, but no

occupant. As the last fish-oil lamp was put out, leaving us in the humid blackness of a tropical night, the adventure took on a decidedly creepy aspect, and I doubt very much that the most benighted savages in the colony were any more scared than I.

Hours came and went, hours that we counted by our radium-faced watches, and which otherwise might have been mistaken for centuries. One o'clock came, and no disturbance. Two o'clock dragged by on leaden feet. Sleep tugged at our eyes.

A scratch on the rock landing in front of the cave entrance and every nerve was on edge. A rustling sound, as of a rubber raincoat. The inky blackness of the door grew denser.

Slowly something moved towards the centre of the cave where Banota usually slept. I could sense the big savage stiffening in his corner for a spring at the intruder—a spring that dared death in its most terrible form. Seego's hand moved, and like a shot down came the weighted net and a blinding flash of white light.

Something blackish grey tore and twisted helplessly inside the net, unable to escape or reach any of us, for it was secured in the middle of the cave like a fly in a spider-web.

Clouds of dust, the only enemy we were not prepared for, rose and blanketed the scene at the same time the sudden light blinded our eyes. In the midst of the confusion, big Banota, goaded to fury at the proximity of what he supposed to be his enemy, sprang barehanded towards the squirming mass in the net, bent on finishing the matter hand to hand.

The doctor, to save Banota's life, loosened the wire that led toward the back of the cave and attempted to swing the thing nearer to the door until he could crowd between Banota and the captive, for he did not want either one destroyed. But instantly everything went wrong. In the space of a second Banota let out a yell of pain, the doctor made a false move with the cables, and the thing we had trapped jerked itself free and went out of the cave door like a black shadow, the rest of us plunging helplessly after it. But of course it was gone.

Our searchlight did not illumine the outside, but savages with pine knots and oil torches were swarming toward the

scene of action from both up and down the trail, and none had seen or met anything.

The next minute the gallant Banota began to groan, and sank down upon the rocky trail in a deathly sickness. Seego turned the bright light on the man and, there upon one stalwart black leg, was the sign of the three crescents.

There was no delay now. Whipping out that ever ready first-aid kit, the doctor opened and cauterised the wound and then administered a hypodermic of strychnine followed by a stiff drink of brandy. Before we left the savage colony at dawn, we had the satisfaction of having beaten the plague on at least one ground, for Banota showed a marked improvement; and his complete recovery in the next three days gave the colony much cause for rejoicing.

We had failed to trap the clawing thing that was destroying Siwaloo's army, we had not learned whether it was beast or human, nor how it made its amazing escapes; but we had analysed its venom and exposed its place of living, in addition to beating it out of one victim.

These factors all added to our enthusiasm for finishing the job of exploring in that black cave across the river, and we worked like beavers during the next three days, throwing a curious sort of suspension bridge across that tempestuous underground stream. Frissian was a master engineer in tight places and by nightfall of the third day the steel framework rested firmly on both sides of the stream. The work of exploring the unknown portion was to proceed the next day.

Uncanny as the project was, there was no restraining a single member of our party from going through the perilous cave next morning. Seego in the lead, as usual, followed by two of our own black men from the *Magpie*, then Frissian and I with two more blacks, and the rest of our party bringing up the rear, we crossed the narrow foot-bridge that had been thrown up and entered the upper end of the cave, that dwelling place of silent terrible danger which no man could define.

The passage here led steadily upward, and the footing was dry and not unpleasant. The continuous draught of air from above lessened one's inclination to feel faint, and we were as

alert and full of adventure as schoolboys when we finally came upon the first signs of what we sought.

Our bridging work had knocked out a considerable part of the crazy scaffolding we found in the cavern, and here, on the floor of the passageway, we found little piles of hardwood sticks of a size and length suitable for rebuilding the work. Whatever these murderous cavern ghouls were, they had evidently started to repair their handiwork when something interrupted them and caused them to drop the bundles of sticks in the passage.

We all helped ourselves to samples of these sticks, and carried along one or two apiece, trying to learn how they had been cut and where; and our curiosity in this line proved valuable a few minutes later. Beyond this point, the passage suddenly opened into a wide underground space that must have covered several acres, for our searchlights did not reach to its furthest limits. Daylight, somewhat subdued, came in from somewhere ahead of us and occasional deposits of phosphorus made a ghostly light in dim corners and crevices, but we still had to use our artificial lights to see our way.

The spacious cavern was somewhat near level on the bottom, although uneven and strewn with rock formations of all shapes and sizes. Above was a 'ceiling' that varied in height from twenty to sixty or seventy feet, seamed with great fissures large enough for a man to crawl in, and festooned with sickly-looking cave vegetation.

There was no sign of the strange inhabitants as we pressed forward towards that daylight ahead, the doctor and Frissian being determined to investigate the source of the light. Finally, we came under a large hole in the rocky roof and, after a little calculation, learned that this opened above into the bottom of an ancient crater. The bottom of the crater had an area of an acre or more, and this flue, by some agency or freak of chance, was walled about so that the heavy rains could not drain into it, otherwise they would have drowned out all forms of life in a day during the wet season.

The last eruption of that old volcano, which occurred before human history began, had left this subterranean space well

concealed and well guarded from above and below; a fit home for midnight prowlers. But where were the things that dwelt there?

Our answer came soon enough.

We paid but little attention to the rock formation above our heads, although we kept a sharp enough lookout for the clawing things that occupied the place, when all at once there was a whirring sound behind our backs, and something like a huge vampire bat shot down from a fissure in the roof and darted at the face of the doctor, who stood a little apart from the rest of us and not so much in the light. He was taken entirely by surprise, and had only time to swing up his hand in self-defence as the thing reached him. A black streak and a rustling sound were all that our senses perceived as the thing dashed at the doctor, dropped to the ground and scurried away into deeper darkness before a light could be trained on it.

The doctor jerked at his first-aid kit with his left hand, shaking his right vigorously. 'Give me a hand, somebody—see—he's gaffed me—see his sign?'

We gathered around somewhat terror-stricken as Frissian, under the doctor's directions, proceeded to clean and cauterise the wounds in Seego's right hand—three little crescents that faced each other. 'Don't waste the silver nitrate,' warned the doctor. 'This may not be the last of the trouble.'

A general desire to get back to our sturdy little suspension bridge began to manifest itself through all our party, and presently we started back towards the entrance. Phelan limbered up his automatic pistol and counted his shells ruefully. 'Twenty little shots,' he said, shaking his head. 'Let's hope they don't travel in swarms.'

Shuddering in spite of myself at the sight we had just witnessed, I made sure that my own good revolver was accessible, and then suggested that a few of the cave-dwellers' sticks might also come in handy. Following this idea, every member of the party proceeded to load his pockets with stones and select a good, knotty club. We were perhaps twenty yards from the end of the narrow passage that led down and out when the deadly attack came.

With no warning except that faint swishing sound, a fleet of the black things suddenly descended from their hiding places in the fissured roof and charged us. Squealing, clawing, with rubbery wings flapping like huge bats, they sought to inflict their poison trademarks on our bodies.

The light flashed in erratic circles in an effort to illuminate the scene, but owing to its funnel-shaped hood it was of little use, and we fought in virtual darkness with the death-dealing and inscrutable things. I forgot my revolver, and seizing my club with both hands, I swung with all my strength towards a shadow that hurtled towards me. There was a gratifying contact with a bony skull, and the thing dropped still and unresisting at my feet.

I struck wildly at another that landed just behind the fallen one and the thing dodged backward with a squeal of rage. Why didn't it fly away as it had come, I wondered? But as events took shape, in the perilous minutes that followed, the reason became clear.

The things could not fly—they could only volplane downwards. Defying death in his pause of a few seconds, Frissian finally tore the metal funnel off the searchlight and it threw a comforting glow in every direction. Pistols barked and flapping, swishing things fell to the ground, helpless, or scrambled away, leaving a trail of blood. And still we knew not what they were, nor did we dare stop fighting for a second to learn, for more than one member of our party was already marked for death with those filthy hypodermics. We must reach the passage-way before we stopped for questions.

At last the things stopped descending and we guessed that they had all come down. They were still lurking in the dark corners, however, and we did not feel safe by any means. One consolation, however, was ours. On the bottom they could move no faster than ourselves and they were at the mercy of our clubs. There came a truce and our two leaders snatched the first-aid kit and called for the injured men. Of the fourteen that composed the party, only five were uninjured by the terrible claws. In spite of treatment there was no escaping the poisonous

effects from the very first minute, even though the lives were eventually saved.

For a full minute not one of the attackers appeared, and for the first time I approached one of the prostrate things for a closer inspection. As I came within reach, however, it came to life enough to reach forward to my leg with a muddy claw. In a transport of revenge, I brought my empty revolver down with a sounding crack on the head and had the pleasure of hearing its puny skull split under the blow. Then I turned it over and looked at its face.

It was human! A human bat!

Between its emaciated arms and its bony legs there stretched a membrane of black skin like the wing of a bat, only different in formation, for the bat's wings are on its elongated fingers, while these stretched from arm to leg like the flaps on a so-called flying squirrel. The rubbery membrane covered two of the original five fingers, leaving three fingers and three toes on each limb available for use. It was hard to draw any distinction between fingers and toes, for both had those wicked horny claw-like nails, which carried the charge of poison for their victims.

I stretched the body out at full length. Although it was nearly five feet tall it could not have weighed more than thirty or forty pounds at the most. The emaciated body was not much larger than the robust doctor's upper arm, while the limbs were mere pipestems.

The face was indescribable. The eyes were small and weak, for a life spent in semi-darkness. The teeth were small, discoloured and sharp-pointed; and the whole head from generations of climbing and sailing was canted upwards like that of a bird, which impression was heightened by its long, pointed nose. The bat-man's facial expression, if there could be an expression on that wizened and wrinkled barb, was one of pure animal ferocity.

In the sickening revelations of the last few minutes, I almost forgot the necessity of escaping rapidly, when Seego's sharp reminder brought us all into line. The doctor was weak and sick from the poison but his dominant mind was not harmed and he was fully aware of our danger. With all the wounds

treated, we hastened toward the exit, keeping a sharp look-out in all directions.

Evidently the things that had fought with us were in no hurry to renew the combat, for we were not pursued. Just as we were about to enter the narrow passage, a ray of light thrown across the rocky ceiling above disclosed one of the largest bat-men hiding in a great crack, hanging on by fingers and toes like an animal. Phelan, walking beside me, waited not for orders. His automatic cracked and the bat-man fell to the ground with a jagged hole in one wing. Another leaped from almost the same spot and for the first time we had a chance to observe how they made such enormous distances. They leaned downwards as far as they could, then sprang with their wiry legs; and the force of gravity thus supplemented, carried them for long distances.

As the wounded bat-man struck the ground it was stunned by the impact and Frissian, quick to seize the opportunity, tore off his own belt and proceeded to tie the dwarf's limbs securely; after which he slung the puny thing on his back and we proceeded unhindered down through the passageway.

As we at last re-emerged into daylight the bat-man 'came to' and began to struggle. Frissian dropped it hastily on the ground.

'Be quiet my hearty,' he said, addressing it, 'while I manicure your nails.' And, drawing the bonds tighter than ever, he proceeded to empty the thing's claws of mud, washing them out with creek water. The captive offered no further resistance and we marched in triumph back to Siwaloo with our story and our prize.

'Doc,' suddenly asked Frissian as we paused for a minute's rest on our return trip. 'What do you think of the old chief's story about the origin of the devils now? Are these the people they thought they exterminated, coming back to get even?'

After a long pause the doctor replied. 'It's a fine plausible tradition, except for one thing. That, if there's any truth in it, it's half a million years old. You'll all have to abide by your own guesses.'

The old savage chief was delighted beyond words to learn the real truth about his enemies, and he was no slower than we were to understand how the things had come down from the top

of the cliff, done their killing and then volplaned on downward, crossing the little river at the foot of the cliff before landing. We could all comprehend, too, how they had climbed up the cliff on the side that 'guarded itself'. Somewhere there was a safe route for the diminutive things to climb to the top, and they were able to experiment till they found it, for what did a few falls mean to men with wings?

As we were planning our departure, Seego announced his decision to take the winged dwarf back to the United States with him. 'It may be involuntary servitude,' he said, facetiously, 'to carry a human being around a strange country without his consent, but if he objects to it I shall prefer charges of first-degree murder against him. With a blow-out patch on that punctured wing he will be able to give flying exhibitions at the museum. Maybe we'll have time to go back and bring his wife, if he will identify the lady.'

We were sitting around Siwaloo's council house—a spacious cavern where many people could be entertained, enjoying the old chief's reactions at the opportunity to study his erstwhile enemy from the volcano, while the bat-man, secured to a ring in the wall, sat hunched up and disconsolate, amid the merriment, like a diminutive Samson at the Philistine feast.

Siwaloo besought us to remain and destroy the whole colony of poison pests across the river and shook his head sadly when we tried to explain our prejudice against wholesale murder.

'Let it be as my white friends say then,' concluded the old man, 'but at least give us a supply of your medicine, that we may cure our injured men. We would also beg one of your bottled lights, but we have not the knowledge to make it burn, and will have to do without it. And we shall deal with the little men according to the custom of Koti.'

He had stepped backward as he spoke, until he was close to the captive bat-man who had seemed harmless since being deprived of his poison. But now, in a sudden, blind fury, the dwarf leaped at Siwaloo's throat, clawing with his three available limbs like a trapped wildcat. It was but the work of a second for the old chief to seize the creature by the neck and

snap its puny spine in two, although his face and arms were covered with ugly gashes when the skirmish ended.

Seego, deprived of his unique exhibit, walked to the door of the cave and gazed meditatively across the river toward the old volcano, and we immediately surmised that he was planning another expedition into the cave to replace his lost prisoner. I rose and went out beside him, and even as we stood thus, there came a sickening shudder in Mother Earth and the cliff on which we stood moved perceptibly. Another eruption was in progress, and what its results might be, no one knew.

There was a storm of excitement, Seego snapping out sharp orders, and the savages scattering about like madmen in their fright, for the experience was all new to them. We tore down the winding trail, abandoning everything we possessed in our rush for the wharf and the safety of the *Magpie*'s decks. The trembling was not repeated, but as we gained the safety of the vessel at last and looked back toward the hill where dwelt the flying men we saw the ancient crater belch forth a great solid mass of yellow smoke—a deadly gas which no living thing, even a microbe, could survive in; and as we steamed away we knew that while Siwaloo's people were probably in no danger, the race of bat-men had been wiped out of existence, and Koti would see no more death crescents.

SWAMP HORROR

WILL SMITH AND R. J. ROBBINS

MAYHAP it was the influence of the moon's rays playing on my recumbent form—or was it a subtle stealing of that eerie sound into the innermost recesses of my subconscious mind? I had suddenly awakened from a profound slumber, every nerve a tingling with the premonition of evil. It was as if a ghostly touch on my brow had called me from the enshrouding incubus of sleep and brought me all up standing with fright! The whole atmosphere seemed surcharged with an electric something that still lingers in my memory. Cursing myself for a timid fool, I crossed to the window, through which the moonlight streamed in a sickly fashion. And now, as I gazed out upon the vista of grey field and ink-black wood I became conscious of a strange stillness, a complete silencing of all the familiar sounds of nature, becoming with each moment more oppressive. Hark! What was that? Reverberating over the distances, horribly loud, came a frenzied, screeching cry!

As I stood at the open window, wildly straining my ears, it came again. This time the cry had almost a human quality, but there had also crept into it a suggestion of eeriness that made my flesh tingle all over and a tremor ran over my spine.

Now I am not a coward, and since early childhood I have never feared the dark nor anything which might lurk under its cover. Still to an essentially city-bred man such an occurrence as this was bound to have a fear-inspiring flavour. I had always, indeed, detested anything rural, even before I suffered the frightful experience I am about to relate; had always entertained for the woods and fields and swamps a nameless, un-

reasoning fear. It was in response to that same fear that I had migrated from the ancestral residence at the tender age of sixteen, getting a job as errand boy in the nearby city. After this I had held down several minor jobs until I had finally found my metier in telegraphy. It was the latter occupation that was earning my living when the awful horror of the swamp took place.

That morning Sam Falton, operator and general factotum at my home town station, had started the ball rolling by engaging me in some small talk on the wire. Both being desirous of learning the Phillips' press code, we had, for practice, been couching every possible word of our conversation in that language. Apparently he had decided to sign off for the time being when he gave a signal for me to hold the wire a moment. His next words gave me a severe jolt.

Literally they were: 'Ml Man js ca in ses u btr cm ses trs smg myx ab it ur dad bn msg nry a wk.' These words, unintelligible to read, were sufficient to cause me to demand leave of absence for an indefinite period. Translated, they are: 'Mail man just come in. Says you better come. Says there's something mysterious about it; your dad been missing nearly a week.'

I had about decided to go back to bed when I heard the sound repeated again and again. It was nearer this time and sounded like the wail of some creature in a frenzy of torture. At times it would end in a long-drawn-out strangling, rattling howl that made my blood run cold.

Could this have anything to do with my father's disappearance? The sounds might have been made by madman or beast, or by something altogether unearthly. My mind, ever used to quick decisions, was instantly made up. I resolved to see.

The night was hot and humid, and in the hollows a heavy ground fog was beginning to manifest itself, and I suspected that before sun-up the air would be pretty chilly. Plainly, time was short, so I contented myself with a pair of trousers, a sleeveless jersey and a pair of tennis shoes which lay at hand. Snatching a hastily lighted lantern, I dashed out into the pulsing night.

The sounds had evidently issued from a stretch of forest

about a quarter mile to the rear of the house, and toward this I made my way. The ground fog had by this time become quite thick, so that at times I had to grope my way through it. Nature had resumed all her various discordant notes. As I entered the forest the odour of decayed vegetation and mould smote my nostrils. The lantern, a relic of bygone days, cast a feeble circle of light which but served to intensify the surrounding gloom. My thoughts, as I struggled through the underbush and thickets, were anything but cheerful.

At times fantastically formed roots took on the appearance of serpents ever waiting to drag me down. That I did not fall on more than one occasion was more a result of good luck than of agility on my part. I must have proceeded into the depths of the woods for at least a mile, when suddenly, the fearful cry came again, now in a direction to my left and somewhat nearer. I shivered and grasped the lantern more tightly; meantime cursing the folly that had sent me on this wild quest unarmed. Then again the cry—fearlessly close!

At this juncture, grown careless of the terrain beneath my feet, I suddenly stumbled violently over a rotting log lying directly in my path. I remember taking a desperate grip on the lantern, which barely prevented it from flying from my hand, when—a most unearthly scream resounded in the bushes not ten feet away, and a huge body dashed against me, brushing me flat and extinguishing the lantern. Before it died the flame flared up into momentary brilliancy, giving me a passing glimpse of a great, wolf-like creature with blood-slavering jaws and terrible glistening fangs!

I struck my head as I fell and my senses reeled.

I have no distinct recollection of my return to the house. I must have lain unconscious in the forest for some time, for it was nearly dawn when I finally got up and somehow made my way out. Once in bed I dropped again into oblivion and did not awake until some hours later.

Since my father had had no hired man and my mother had died long years before, there was no one to call me or to prepare the meals. When I finally found the ambition to rise and dress, my first act was to get together a meal, for I intended to cover

a lot of ground during the day and felt that my stomach should be well fortified. Had I known what lay ahead of me, I doubt if I could have eaten anything!

I had about finished my bacon and coffee when I was aroused from a momentary abstraction by a sound from the outside. A quick glance around the premises revealing nothing, I was about to give up the search when I heard it again; but this time it was a low moan and of a character which I recognised. Hurrying to the back shed, I threw open the door. There brilliantly limned in the shaft of sunlight that streamed in, lay the still form of a huge wolfhound!

I started back aghast. Could this gaunt creature be our good old Fang, the pet with whom father and I had been used to spend so many happy hours, and who had greeted me with such rough joy only yesterday? Yes, it was indeed he, for at my call the faithful fellow struggled feebly to his feet and, swaying, drunkenly, wagged a heroic tail.

But to what a terrible state the animal had been reduced! His whole figure was wasted to a painful thinness. His skin, hairless in patches, was nearly white, colourless. The poor creature seemed to be suffering from what I could attribute to no other cause than such a weakness as is caused by heavy loss of blood. And yet, minutely examining every inch of the slackened skin, I could find not a scratch, *no visible wound whatever!*

I lost no time in feeding the dog and did my poor best at doctoring him. My efforts, aided no doubt by the vitality of his ancient wild ancestry, were sufficiently successful to enable the animal after a while to recover enough strength to walk without difficulty, and even to run and fetch sticks. But I knew well that it would be many days before he could regain the robust sturdiness of the day before.

What, I kept wondering, could have been the agency that had brought Fang to this pitiful condition? What could have drained his veins so completely without leaving a single mark? Where had he been the night before and what frightful thing could have reduced him to that state of abject fear that caused him to dash so madly through the forest uttering those agonised

strangled screams? For I was convinced that the creature I had encountered last night under such terrifying circumstances was none other than Fang, his really monstrous size enlarged in my terror-stricken eyes to gigantic proportions.

But I could swear to the blood I had seen dripping from the beast's jaw. Whence had that come?

The horrible answer to all these questions was vouchsafed to me that very day.

It being by now early afternoon, I realised that if I were to search for my father today, I should have to start at once. As I locked up the house preparatory to setting out I tried to recall to mind the general topography of the region.

The farm, which has been in the possession of our family more than a century, is of considerable extent, and is made up mostly of timberland and swamp, there being only a few acres of open land. Directly to the rear of the house is a large forest tract, some parts of which have not been penetrated by men for years. Beyond this is an almost unexplored waste, known as Old Marvin's Swamp.

Legend has it that Old Man Marvin, who owned the farm before it came into my family, died in this vicinity under mysterious circumstances, and it is thought that his bones found their last resting place at the bottom of the morass. The only clue to his fate was furnished by his ancient shotgun and a few bloodstains found near a stagnant pool in the depths of the marsh. I shudder as I recall the terrible solution I myself was enabled to furnish to this mystery of long ago!

In starting on the search my footsteps followed almost without deviation the course I had pursued the previous night, but this time I was not alone. The great wolf-hound was now my guide and I soon discovered he was following a scent. Indeed I had considerable difficulty at times in keeping up with him, so great was his evident desire to lead me to a definite spot.

The forest tract is in itself extensive and is pretty wild. My father had never allowed anyone to hunt here except members of the family, and as a result the place abounded with partridges, squirrels, rabbits and other small game. Occasionally even, I would get a glimpse of a deer or a fox as it leapt away

at my approach. Everywhere was the odour of pine, hemlock and decaying vegetation. The silence of the place was so profound that the smallest sound was immediately noticeable, and even the snapping of twigs under foot and the breaking of dead branches as I made my way through the thickets, served to keep my nerves continually on edge. At length we had penetrated to the other side of the forest, and I found myself at the edge of Marvin's Swamp. Somehow, call it premonition or what you will, a cold shiver passed up my spine as I gazed upon this dreary stretch, and I glanced round apprehensively.

Nothing appeared within my field of vision which could possibly be alarming, so after a brief hesitation I followed the big wolfhound on the trail. Within a few minutes I could see that we were heading towards the vilest part of the great morass, and again that strange presentiment of evil came over me. The ground was getting softer now, and small sink-holes became more and more numerous. For an hour we pushed on, the way becoming more difficult every minute. The vegetation here grew very rankly, and had become almost entirely aquatic. Cat o' nine tails were now in evidence everywhere, especially about the spot where the dog now impatiently awaited me. This spot was at what marked the centre of Marvin's Swamp—a small stream of almost stagnant water known as Dead River.

The name is rather a dignity, for Dead River is in reality a little more than an arm of the main pool of the swamp. Its course had once been traced back and found to extend through the worst part of the region for about a mile and thence into the hills, where its only source was found to be a series of small springs. At the bank of this repulsive waterway I stopped and began to examine the locality closely. Finally, I found what I had been looking for, namely a multitude of footprints in the soft mud. A glance at these was enough to convince me as to who had made the tracks, but such evidence was as nothing to that which now met my eye. For a little to the right of the trail, half-hidden in a tuft of rank grass into which it had evidently been unwittingly dropped lay father's familiar old hunting knife! I bowed my head; all hope had left me.

But I had little time to stand here sadly musing, for the

strange behaviour of the dog now claimed my attention. He stood a little way ahead of me along the bank, trembling from head to drooping tail; first whining beseechingly back at me, then snarling with a sort of frightened ferocity as he gazed ahead to where the trail led into a dark, evil-looking glade. Absently dropping the knife into a trouser pocket, I hastened to follow his fear-halted lead; and my quest came to an abrupt end.

The glade—what a hideous spot it was! The river at this point was but a desolation of cat o' nine tails and green, slimy water. Little green lizards basked dreamily on rotting logs and swam lazily about in the stagnant pool. Brilliant coloured dragonflies poised for a breathless instant over foul, exotic lilies, only to dart away into black, hot aisles of the swamp. Leeches were everywhere, and now and again a water-snake came zigzagging among the lily pads in search of prey. More noisome still, the bottom of the pool and its filthy banks were littered with all kinds of dead creatures—all sizes of bodies, from those of tiny squirrels up to the carcasses of bob-cats and even deer. Not one of them bore a visible wound, and every one was almost colourless. Those soaking in the murky water were bloated into gross exaggerations of their proper sizes, but those on the banks were dry, shrivelled, shrunken things! All this I noted as in a wondering dream, the while I gazed on the body of my father.

It lay on the bank with one leg dangling in the water, the limbs weirdly contorted, as though the man had succumbed only after a terrific struggle. Nearly demented, I flew frantically at the body, seizing it by the shoulders and yanking it clear of that horrible pool. A hasty examination sufficed to show that father had met the same mysterious fate that had taken toll of so many lives in this hateful place.

I had barely made the discovery when I was completely undone by a distant long-drawn-out howl—the frightened bay of the wolfhound. His mission accomplished, he had promptly deserted, leaving me alone with my dead.

I was not long to wonder why!

What was the terrible fate that could strike down a man in the sanguine glow of physical strength and activity and leave

this shrivelled white bloodless death? And that, too, without leaving a single mark on the husk of a body! To be sure, the clothing was covered with dried bloodstains, but whence had the blood come? Was there not some tiny wound which I, in my first frantic pawing of the corpse had overlooked—perhaps the two little purple holes which I shudderingly remembered were supposed to be the mark of venomous snake bites? I stooped again and clutching my jaws to still my chattering teeth, began a careful search of the drained thing that had been my father. And as the fruitless quest went on, there came again that hush, that awed stilling of the myriad sounds of this rank nature about me.

I became conscious of each noise, as it were, when it had ceased to beat its note on my ears. The shrilling of the frogs first dropped out of nature's discordant symphony, to be followed by the chirp of the crickets, the various low bird twitterings and rustlings, and other sounds, most of them to me fearsomely unidentified. Now all that remained was the droning of bees, punctuated at longish intervals by the mournful *sol do-do-do-lo-do-oo* of a far-away swamp robin.

Now, after one dismally long drawn-out call, the bird became silent, and the only sound left in the steamy fetid swamp was that bee-hum. This now seemed slowly to increase in volume, until finally, the very air became charged and volatile with its menace. At last I could endure the deafening sound no longer, and, eardrums bursting with the throbbing zooming waves—smothered in them, overwhelmed—I toppled over in a dead faint.

I was destined soon to bless that fainting fall, for I was to realise that it had saved me from a fate worthy of the ingenuity of a thousand fiends—the same ravaged death that had claimed my father.

Of course, I could not have lain unconscious more than a minute or two, but at the time it seemed ages before I opened my eyes—opened them to a sun-drenched, somehow less fearful world—to find myself sprawled on my back, evidently in a little depression. Of this hollow, the bottom seemed covered

with some wet, sticky substance, which to my not over-critical bones made a rather pleasant couch.

Nature had resumed her normal note, and I became gratefully conscious that the horrible droning of bees was no longer in evidence. As I again closed my eyes in response to a certain feeling of lassitude that bound me, I wondered if it had been a sound from the outside world or if it had come from within me. Dreamily revolving the affair in my mind, I was inclined to believe that the whole thing—the hush, the drumming in my ears and the faintings—had been caused by the gradual weakening of my faculties. But then how to account for that weakening?

The mystery was getting too deep for me and I almost decided to give it all up and flee from this hellish swamp, sending someone in after father's body. At any rate, I could not lie long dreaming in this soft bed. Lazily I opened my eyes; wearily I stretched out an arm; limply I let it fall at my side; and then, screeching with all my poor strength, I leapt to my feet. My outflung arm had dropped with a sirupy splash in what was revealed to my popping eyes as thickening, dark red blood!

And now began the horror—an experience so incredibly grotesquely horrid that recollection of its lewd details now halts my pen and imbues me with stark nausea. If I had disliked and distrusted the woods and waste places before, my feeling was nothing compared to the seething loathing hate that grips me now at the mention of that damned word swamp.

Reeling giddily, my unmanning utterly completed by the sickening realisation that I had been lolling so softly in a bed of blood, I had only time to clutch at a long-hanging vine for support before the things—those fat, slime-sweating crawling *things*—came on! There seemed to be hundreds of them—snail-shaped things as large as dogs—hemming me in on every side. With a slow irresistible purpose they advanced in a horrible silence. As they closed in, their silence became broken by a nasty greasy sound as of molasses being lazily lifted and stirred with a million sticks. Now they were upon me, and I ran amok!

I leapt on to the nearest and tried to scuff them into the earth. I beat them foolishly with my fists; I sought to hug them

off my heaving chest; I rolled over and over them; I tore at their filthy bodies with my teeth; the while I uttered one tortured shriek after another. But in my unarmed state I was no match for the horde, and the things continued in their deadly purpose, bearing me down and beginning to fasten themselves on to every part of me. At last my frenzied yells were stilled by a clammy body laid across the whole lower half of my face; and now my eyes, rolling in dumb agony, encountered the foulest scene of all, and I understood.

The blood-filled hollow in which I had been lying, crowding around all sides of it like pigs at a trough were a dozen of the monsters, greedily and with many blubbery swilling sounds absorbing the clotting gore.

Now I knew the fate that had befallen father, had taken Old Marvin years before, had claimed the deer and other animals, had dragged at Fang when he had searched out father's body, and now bade fair to add me to those other drained cadavers. Yes, I could see it all now, could understand anything in this rank world of evil growths.

Bloodsuckers! That's what they were! Great fat over-grown leeches; spawned by the filth and grown here to this morbid size by centuries of breeding and interbreeding in this lushness. Oh, the horror that swept me!

It was when the obscene feast drew to a close that I thanked God for the fall I had taken a few minutes before when I fainted, for there was now revealed in the bottom of the depression the empty sacklike body of one of the gigantic leeches. Evidently the scout of the main herd, it had stolen and fastened itself to my back as I stooped over the remains of my father. Its slow sapping of my life blood had caused the humming in my ears and finally the deathly faint which had saved my life and been the thing's undoing. For in falling, I had landed on my back on a jagged bit of stone which had pierced and emptied the creature, filling my resting place with blood.

The sharp tip of the rock now protruded through the flattened carcase and became my inspiration. What did it suggest to me? I was fast sinking into soft black oblivion and could not think

—did not care to—very much. Now another slimy body drew along my head and settled itself in such a way as to cover my eyes, shutting out the scene completely. Still the memory of that rock sliver persisted and disturbed me vaguely. What did it remind me of? Well, I didn't know . . . never mind . . . But yes, I did know! Now I had it—a knife! Father's knife, in my pocket!

Gone in a breath was that deathly langour. I became imbued with the strength of desperation. I heaved, I threshed—one hand came clear. Lifting the arm, almost unmindful of the weight of a monster clinging to it, I worked my hand between two foul bodies into my pocket. And now I drew it out, clutching that blessed knife!

Butchery! Blood!

My first kill was that bloated thing that lay across my scalp and eyes. But what a flood of gore now cascaded over me, filling hair, ears and eyes! Blinking an eye, I plunged the knife into the stinking monster that locked my mouth—and was rewarded by being again soaked in a green-streaked red deluge! My mouth free, I found strength once more to yell, but now a note of battle and triumph in the cry!

Slashing and hacking, I gained my feet. Now I seemed to swim in a sea of blood, as sinking the knife to the hilt again and again, I finally freed my legs. And even as I had used my mouth the instant I had cleared it, so now I used my legs. Stumbling, groping, crying, laughing, I ran.

GOLDEN LILIES

OSCAR COOK

CHAN AH FOOK, magistrate of a provincial town in a remote part of China, and a very important person in consequence, was also a man of no small means, for, apart from his native shrewdness, there was much that was lucrative attached to his position. To add to the good things of life, he was married to a wife—a child-widow—who was the apple of his eye, and who was possessed of 'Golden lilies' incomparable in all the vast domain of China.

Yet on this day, sitting in his room, smoking his opium pipe—he was disturbed. Though on the pikong the candles were lighted and trays were piled with fresh offerings of sweets and chow, chosen parts of pig and products of the Deep, while from innumerable joss sticks rose thin, shady columns of smoke.

Silence reigned in the room save for the patter of Lee Min Yen's 'Golden lilies' as she moved about the apartment, and the occasional clatter of dishes as with wifely devotion she arranged her lord's repast.

She was very pretty, was Lee Min Yen, very pretty indeed, and a wife to be proud of; and it seemed as if Chan Ah Fook must have been almost Heaven-born indeed, when one considered his position, his wealth and his wife. Yet as he sat on in silence giving every now and then a pull at his pipe, the frown on his face would deepen, his hands become the tighter clenched, and not even all the outward charm of Lee Min Yen—her shiny, oiled hair, her long and dazzling eyes, her wondrous complexion made up of scented pearl dust, her

vermilion painted lips, her 'golden lilies' could rouse him from his deep despair.

The silence became oppressive, so oppressive that Lee Min could bear it no longer, and decided to risk her lord's displeasure. With a graceful movement she sank upon her knees close to Ah Fook, and with clasped hands pressed to her breast and the faintest tinge of half-fear, half-coquetry in her voice, she spoke.

'Will not my gracious lord partake of the food his poor Lee Min has prepared for him and brought with her own hands?'

Silence; still the frown deepened on Ah Fook's face. Sinking lower upon her knees and stretching out her right hand in supplication, Lee Min spoke again—this time her accents full of pleading.

'My lord, most honourable master, and has this poor slave, this earthworm, on whom thou has spread the light of thy glorious countenance, offended? Thy Lee Min Yen, thy wife and slave, whose "golden lilies" were once thy greatest joys, in whose eyes thou didst once acclaim thou sawest the stars, has prepared and spread for her honourable master the sweetest delicacies this land possesses—birds' nests from North Borneo, sharks' fins from the China Sea—and thou heedst not, neither thy food nor my poor voice.'

Lee Min, as no response was vouchsafed her, withdrew her suppliant hand to join its fellow on her breast, bowed her head lower and lower till it touched the ground at Ah Fook's feet, and commenced slowly to weep. And it was the sound of weeping that aroused Ah Fook from his reverie. Deliberately he put his pipe on one side and looked long and lingeringly on the bowed head. Deliberately he stretched forth a hand, the long fingernails glistening in the lamplight, and stroked the shining, well-oiled hair. Then spoke.

'I am sick, Lee Min.'

'My lord!' The words were a startled cry. 'And what ails thee? 'Tis not the plague or smallpox—tell me that? See, thy Lee Min will fetch thee medicines and watch thee all the night.' And in an instant Lee Min was upon her feet, her tears dry, and turning to a cabinet in the wall when Ah Fook spoke again.

'Nay—'tis not my body that is ailing—but never mind.'

'My Heaven-born's mind? Nay, that it cannot be, for thou art all wise, all justice. All men proclaim thy wisdom day by day. Are not the evil-doers affrighted because of thee? My lord, is it not thy subtlety that tracks their crime and finds them guilty? Thou seekest—oh Heaven-born—best beloved of Confucius—to allay thy Lee Min's fears, and of the goodness of thy heart—'

'Enough!' The word, accompanied by an imperious gesture of the hand struck like an icicle upon Lee Min's adoring protestations. She bowed her head and meekly waited.

'Tis as I say—I am sick of mind.'

'My lord!' The words were eloquent of complete submission.

'Thou little knowest of the daily doings of the world outside. I do not grumble, for it is our custom for our women to keep indoors—'tis as it should be; thy beauty and delights are mine, thy master and thy husband; for me thy "golden lilies" and vermilion lips; for me thy coiled hair and diamond eyes; for me—'

'If not for thee, my Heaven-born—then for whom?' Lee Min broke in, all wonder, all questioning in the voice and poise of body. 'My lord, my lord—'

'Nay, nay, be not afraid,' Ah Fook quickly interrupted. 'I do not charge thee with lightness of love or infidelity, but seek to explain to thee what ails me—such is the sickness of my mind that I do stoop to tell my troubles to a woman. But 'tis the magic of thy eyes, the perfume of thy hair and powder, thy "golden lilies" that make my brain like water.'

'And is my lord angry with his Lee Min because as yet she has not borne him a man-child? If so, my lord—'

'Peace! Hold thy peace. Thou scourgest me with every word and torturtest me with every gesture. Tonight—tonight—why after tonight there will be no more—'

'No more?'

'But thy frail body and sinuous limbs, thy lustrous eyes and perfumed breath, thy oiled hair and almond eyes, thy "golden lilies" and clinging lips no other shall possess. If I must die—thou diest too.'

'My lord, thou frightenest me—thy look is so wild—assuredly thou art ill. If thou diest, then I die, too; but why, oh Heaven-born, this talk of death? Assuredly my lord is ill; tell me, I pray, what ails thee? Let me send—'

With an impatient gesture of utter weariness, Ah Fook silenced his wife; then, beckoning to her to draw near, continued.

'Come here; sit down beside me and listen; and if thou wouldst see tomorrow, wouldst feel the warm blood coursing through thy veins, wouldst feel again my arms around thee, wouldst earn three golden *chan* (Spanish combs) for thy hair, then think, and solve the riddle I propound thee.'

In obedience to the command, Lee Min knelt down by her lord, clasped her hands upon her lap and waited.

'Thou sayest truly, Lee Min, that I am wise, that I am justice. Else had I not been these many years a magistrate and passing rich withal. To track the criminal and bring him to his deserts according to his crime has been my lot, and never till now has anyone escaped me.'

'My lord.'

'But hadst thou mixed with others of a coarser breed, or been like those who sell their body for another's pleasure, thou must have known the custom of this land, that he who fails to bring to justice the perpetrator of a given crime must pay the penalty that he himself would exact.'

'And hast thou failed, oh Heaven-born? Is that what ails thee now?'

Impotent rage and shame—rage at his failure, shame at his lost dignity—so filled Ah Fook's heart that he could not speak. He merely nodded his head in acquiescence, the while Lee Min waited.

At length, controlling his emotions, Ah Fook continued.

'Even so, I, Chan Ah Fook, magistrate, famed throughout the land for justice and for wisdom, the tracker of a hundred hundred crimes, before whom all the evil-doers quake and hide their heads lest my sharp eye and quickened ear should find them out—I—I am reduced to tell my troubles to a woman, to sit

and mope like any cursed "Konsikan" the while the sands of time are running out.'

'Speak on, my lord,' Lee Min broke in as Ah Fook paused for breath. 'And if Lee Min's poor woman's wits can help thee, then rest assured, oh Heaven-born, that all is thine. But first must thou quench thy thirst—thy throat is dry, thy lips parched. See thy poor slave brings unto thee a bowl of soup, cooked with her own hands and made of nought but the purest birds' nests from that strange land of Borneo.'

And so saying, Lee Min got up from her knees, picked up the bowl of soup and brought it to Ah Fook, who, with trembling hands, lifted it to his mouth and drained it dry without so much as a gulp.

Silently Lee Min received the bowl from Ah Fook, gently replaced it on the tray whence she had taken it; replaced two flickering tapers on the pikong, and then knelt down again by her lord's feet and waited.

'Thirteen days ago a crime was committed in this town—a crime the infamy of which has spread far and wide, until the populace clamour daily for the criminal. For thirteen days I have searched high and low—doubled the number of my spies—each day increased the value of my reward—each morning has a man been arrested, each evening has he been released, refusing the bribe of five thousand yen for his family to confess to guilt! for thirteen days have I been defied and hoodwinked—and now—'

'Yes!' The word came as a whisper from Lee Min, who was leaning forward on her hands, wondering attention blazing from her eyes.

'The days of grace are over.'

'My lord!' The words were a startled cry, a very breath of pain.

'Tomorrow!' Ah Fook's voice was cold and relentless with the fatalism of the East. 'Before the lesser magistrates and Police I must confess my failure and pass sentence.'

'But on whom?'

'Myself! Have I not told thee, woman, that he who fails to

bring to justice the perpetrator of a crime must pay the penalty that he himself would bestow?"

"But thou didn't talk of death, my lord, just now—why—why must—"

"Peace—hold thy peace, thou daughter of torment!" Ah Fook broke in, his Oriental calm failing before Lee Min's dense stupidity.

"Have I not said that I must pay the penalty, and the penalty for the taking of life is—"

"Death!" Lee Min did not speak the word—it was not a whisper, hardly an articulate sound, but a long, shuddering moan that came as she fainted at Ah Fook's feet.

Cursing all women in general and his wife in particular, Ah Fook callously threw some water over Lee Min's face, then slowly and methodically filled his opium pipe. And such was his occupation when a minute later Lee Min recovered from her swoon. Tearfully and humbly she pleaded forgiveness for her weakness and her fault—the disturbing of her Lord—using all her woman's art to charm away the frown upon his face, and in the end succeeding. Ah Fook relented, his overburdened mind gave way before her solicitude, her almond eyes glistening with unshed tears, the scented pearl dust and vermillion tinted lips tempted him beyond control and stirred again his passion.

If tomorrow he must die—this night at least was his. He would unburden his soul—let loose his dignity—tell her the whole horrible story of the crime and then—and so with puckered brow and tight-shut lips, hands clenched and rigid body Lee Min heard the story. No word she uttered till the close. Then a slow, illuminating smile broke over her face, and bending forward till her lips touched Ah Fook's ear, the pearl dust from her chin falling on to his shoulder, she whispered just four words; then passed into an inner room.

Four words only, yet enough to rouse in Ah Fook a hope, enough to breed a new and desperate suspicion.

Ah Fook did not follow for many hours. There was that which kept him occupied until far into the night.

The dawn of the next day broke with that insidious subtlety so peculiar to the East. In the west a dying moon still bathed the world in its wintry light. Over the tops of a range of hills, to the east, an opalescent light was creeping; slowly but surely dispelling the night. Stronger and clearer it grew, changing from opal to pale gold and then to shining brass, till, with a burst of glory, the whole radiant sun looked down upon a world freshly waking to the wonders of another day. The dew-drops on the grass glistened like a million million diamonds; the very shadows seemed alive and dancing, changing their playgrounds with an impish fancy; the faintest of breezes stirred but the leaves of the trees; birds sang to each other, while the cocks commenced their morning crowing; cattle began to graze and pigs to grunt and from the multitude of houses scattered over the flat open land, each one surrounded by a garden, came forth the hardy gardeners to collect and take their produce to the market of the town that from a tiny hill close by brooded sentinel-like over the mighty plain.

As the hours passed on, as the sun rose higher and the shadows grew fewer, as the heat began to dispel the cool of early dawn, a sense of expectancy, a wave of timorous inarticulate excitement settled upon all those within the precincts of the town. Like a heavy mist it lay stretching from wall to wall and gradually escaped those limits to roll down upon the plain, enveloping the gardens. So potent in strength that the gardeners ceased their work and by twos and threes collected to wend their way, first silently, then shrilly clamorous, talking and gesticulating to the town to swell the numbers crowding round outside the courthouse.

For the common herd were not permitted to enter, nor, if they had been, would there have been room for them all. Every inch of space save a square in the middle was taken up by the notables gathered to witness the most unique spectacle of their lives—the spectacle of Chan Ah Fook, magistrate, passing judgment on—whom? That was what they had come to see and hear

on this the fourteenth day since that hideous purposeless murder had been committed.

In seats to the right and left of the square squatted the police and lesser magistrates, expectancy written on their faces. The air was full of buzzing and humming of voices rising and falling in that crescendo and diminuendo so peculiar to a crowd of human beings gathered together in a limited space, and the crescendo was at its height when of a sudden—so sudden that the following silence was felt to be almost a physical entity—it ceased as, slowly and majestically, Chan Ah Fook walked up the courthouse and claimed the only vacant seat—one slightly elevated from the rest—and coolly surveyed the crowded court.

With that sense of the dramatic, combined with that almost inhuman Eastern endurance to which Ah Fook owed much of his success, he gauged to a nicety the limit of patience of those around him; and as a long gasping sigh broke out from every heart present, he rose from his seat and, stretching out his right hand, proclaimed silence—then spoke.

‘My friends, I will not pretend I do not know that you are all interested even as I am in the ceremony about to be performed. There is no need for me to inform you—you the Executive and Interpreters of the Law—of the extraordinary and irrevocable sentence that may be passed today before you all; nor will I pretend not to know the reason why the court is packed beyond its normal limits. You have come to whet your jaded senses, to witness a spectacle unique in all your lives and to look upon my failure—the first and last in my career. Nay, Kim Swee Kim, crouch not so in thy seat nor try to hide thy gloating pleasure from my eyes. Art not thou next to me in rank, and hast thou not for years coveted my place, and dost thou not see thyself now raised—even as I am—above thy fellows?’

So saying, Ah Fook pointed one long forefinger at a fellow magistrate who sat opposite him and upon whose face there hovered a smile of covetous greed but ill-concealed. Then after a pause he continued:—

‘But thou must curb thy patience even a little longer, Swee Kim; until such time as the sentence I pronounce has been carried out, and who knows, perhaps even longer yet. For I love

this life and my position, and am not minded to make way for thee as yet.'

'But the law, the custom of our city?' gasped out Swee Kim with ill-concealed haste.

'Shall be fulfilled,' said Ah Fook with majestic pomp, and thereupon clapped his hands three times in quick succession; in answer to which signal there strode up the court four coolies bearing on their shoulders an oblong box—like to a coffin—which they put down in the open square in the middle of the court—and then waited.

All present pressed forward in their seats and a gasp of expectancy rose heavenwards as Ah Fook, saying no word, made a sign to the coolies to open the lid of the box and lift out its contents.

This they did and, lowering it on to a litter that was at hand, exposed a corpse, rigid and cold in death.

For a minute there was silence, then a shudder ran round the courthouse, then a murmur of inarticulate questions in horror. Ah Fook raised his hand to command attention and spoke.

'You see before you the body of him who fourteen days ago was murdered and whose slayer is yet at large. You have come together to hear sentence pronounced upon the murderer, or failing one whose guilt is proved, upon—' and Ah Fook paused dramatically, then finished with quiet intensity 'myself!'

An audible shudder ran through the courthouse and then subsided. The silence was intense, almost suffocating in its strength. Ah Fook looked round the room upon the half-horror-struck, half-questioning faces, then clapped his hands again and waited. . . . Up the aisle of the court was led a woman—her face covered by a scarf that bound her eyes—and placed on the left of the body on the stretcher.

Ah Fook descended from his chair and walked to the corpse slowly, and with infinite disgust yet firmly and calmly, he lifted up the pigtail, for the body had lain face downwards on the litter, while at the same time he who had led in the woman untied the bandage from her eyes. For a second or two, her eyelids, alone visible in her veiled face, flickered uncertainly in the sudden glare of light, then steadied. Then—shriek upon shriek

broke the stillness of the court and as the woman fell fainting to the floor a shaft of sunlight struck upon and made to glitter a brass-headed nail that had been driven into the back of the neck of him who had been her husband.

In a sky that was nearly starless, so bright was the light, rode a full round moon. In a chill and desolate cell in a distant part of the city sat a wretched woman gazing with unseeing eyes at the slowly moving shadows on the wall. Waiting in loneliness and fear for the morrow's dawn—the last her eyes would witness—for self convicted she had confessed her crime, admitted to the slaying of her husband. So death in some cruel and subtle form awaited her. From out the garden, laden with perfumes, that surrounded Ah Fook's house, up stairs that led to Lee Min's own chamber, climbed two people. In the hair of one whose golden lilies moved as lightly as thistledown were three golden *chan*. In the heart of the other was passionate love.

III

The polygamous instinct of man is as old as the world. According to his environment, upbringing and wealth he more or less acknowledges it from the first day of his adolescence to the last day of his life, and in Ah Fook's land a man's social position was greatly reckoned by the luxury in which he maintained his legal mistress.

Chan Ah Fook was the First Magistrate of his town. His position was one of pre-eminence. The unwritten law demanded that his social obligations should be as adequately met as those of his legal position.

So, on the outskirts of the town was a house gorgeously furnished, surrounded by a large garden full of arbours and cunningly contrived seats, and ponds full of fish, and grasses hiding many water-fowl; and here lived Sin Fan Sin—the mistress of Ah Fook.

Fan Sin was beautiful, almost as beautiful as Lee Min Yen and with her wealth and position and idleness she should have been happy. Yet she was not, for jealousy is a bad companion,

and the mistress of many years is bound to hate the wife of today. Sin Fan Sin had never met Lee Min, but until two years ago when the latter became Ah Fook's wife, all the magistrate's caresses and love had been for Fan Sin. Now everything was changed. Ah Fook's visits were less and less frequent as his gifts became more and more, and since the day of the great trial, nearly ten months ago, he had only stepped twice inside the house. Yet fate has a way of weaving a web of his own, and it was just now that fate decreed, towards the end of these ten months, that Ah Fook should take to revisiting Sin Fan Sin.

For was not Lee Min Yen peevish and petulant? Was she not frequently ailing and full of caprices? She wanted this and then that, and having obtained both, she wanted neither. She would no longer study the whims of her lord and master; no longer spend long hours cooking soup of Borneo birds' nests, nor charm his senses with her sinuous form and her golden lilies. So . . . Ah Fook was an Oriental, and nearly omnipotent. His wife, though loved, was his chattel. Her women would look after her and in the meantime till that longed-for man-child was born, there was Sin Fan Sin, who for so many months had been neglected.

But the revival of Ah Fook's visits and the touch of his caresses, though in a way balm to Sin Fan Sin's wounded pride, yet failed to allay her jealousy of Lee Min Yen, for she was clever enough to realise that her regained supremacy was only temporary, unless. . . . No wits are so sharpened as those urged on by jealousy, and no game is ever lost till it is won, and Fan Sin was fighting for her love. For in her warped and secret way she loved Ah Fook and could ill tolerate his divided and lessening allegiance.

Every night for a week had Ah Fook come to Fan Sin; each night more restless and depressed; each night an easier prey to Fan Sin's charms; each night more ready to listen to her voice, to heed her words and ponder her seemingly idle prattle, and so without a conscious knowledge were born the insidious thoughts of suspicion in Ah Fook's heart—suspicion of his wife, Lee Min Yen.

Gratefulness had given place to surprise; surprise to wonder,

and then wonder had changed, and slowly, relentlessly grown into suspicion in spite of love. 'Look beneath the pigtail'. Those words kept passing through Ah Fook's brain—they danced before his eyes, haunting him, always before him, till at last in an utter agony of mind he gasped out aloud 'How did she know, how did Lee Min know?' and then realised the purport of the question.

A cold sweat ran down his back; he trembled in every limb as, unbidden and unsought, the answer seemed to penetrate his brain. She, too, had killed her former husband! Yet it could not be—it was utterly preposterous! Impossible! There could be no truth in it. The mere idea, the bare suspicion! 'Look beneath the pigtail.' The words danced in letters of dripping blood before his eyes, driving out all thoughts of chivalry and love; leaving only a gnawing, hungering thirst for knowledge—for certainty to quiet the raging tempest in his brain.

Was he not Magistrate and so well-nigh omnipotent? Did anyone exist to gainsay his whim? Was he not rich while many were poor, and did not money possess a power to work his will? He would exhume Lee Min's former husband and set at rest his tormenting questions, and then when he found his best beloved innocent—as innocent she must be—what horrible punishment would he not mete out to Sin Fan Sin, the author of his doubts and fears?

In a room of his house, but scantily lighted, stood Chan Ah Fook, listening. Presently his ears caught the sound of irregular footsteps coming closer and closer till they seemed to halt outside the chamber. Silently Ah Fook pulled back a curtain, signed to those outside to enter, and waited motionless while four men carried in a coffin, worn and worm-eaten. At a sign and a word from Ah Fook they opened the lid, but refrained from removing it. Then they withdrew.

Irresolute, sweating, trembling, Ah Fook stood. A long-drawn groan—the cry of a woman in travail—aroused him, urged him to an almost unconscious action. He crossed to the coffin, hesitated a moment, then lifted the lid as cry upon cry rang through the house. Then silence. Blindly Ah Fook's hand

sought the contents of the coffin, fingered and searched among the bones, then closed.

The wail of a new-born infant broke the silence. It startled Ah Fook and he withdrew his hand. The flickering light from the tapers fell upon his face then danced upon his hand, and caught in their rays a brass-headed nail.

THE SEVEN LOCKED ROOM

J. D. KERRUISH

FRANK CREWKERNE was twenty-six when it happened. For sixteen years he had taken it for granted that the thing would never come his way, and had thanked fate accordingly. Ever since he was old enough for the fear of it to bite his soul. Or into his nerves. And in his twenty-sixth year every barrier went down and it faced him nakedly.

From Frank's lodgings to the motor sale-rooms where he worked was a walk of two streets' length. That morning Frank was his normal self for half the length of the first one; big, blithe, ruddy of face and springy of step. Also as happy as any king might be if he had been dethroned and was earning a fair salary fairly, while other monarchs hung round Labour Exchanges or went about with ex-Royal string bands. The cataclysm was announced by Ruddiman; Tom Ruddiman, one of the abysmal bores who *will* detail the news before you have got your paper.

'There's some sensation today, old bean!' Ruddiman shouted as he ran to overtake his prey. 'About the "Seven Locked Room".'

Frank started and stopped dead. 'Eh?' he gasped.

'Oh, you'll remember, Crewe. We talked it over the other day. All the holders of the secret are dead.'

'Dead?' Frank repeated.

'Lord Crewkerne died yesterday; his two sons, one grandson and the steward and family priest all croaked in the week before. A 'flu epidemic, you know.'

'Then the Room of the Seven Locks has been opened?'

'Of course not. It has to be left till the new Lord Crewkerne opens it. That's where the jam for the Pressmen comes in—nobody knows where the lucky bird is! Missing heir business you know. It appears he's a far away relation of the late peer and they weren't on speaking terms; but if the lawyers don't find him soon the papers will, you bet, Crewe!'

Frank was dimly surprised at his own composure. 'Got the paper with you, Tom?' he asked 'No? Then what did it say about the Room?'

His voice was not normal, but your news retailer is deafened and blinded by the exercise of his hobby. 'Only what everyone who reads magazines and haunted-houses books knows already.' Ruddiman babbled on. 'That the Crewkerne family has owned Colfe Castle in Somerset, where the Secret Room is, since the Flood. That every Baron Crewkerne, his heir when of age, the Family Priest and the Estate Steward are initiated into the secret of what's in the Room. And that they must visit it at intervals; and the secret is so awful that no one has betrayed it as yet.'

'Do the papers offer any explanation of what the secret is?'

'Only the same tales we discussed. That the Room's crammed with the skeletons of some enemy of the family who were starved to death in it in the dubious old days. That a monster, half-human, half-animal, is born in the family once in a generation and kept there till it dies—Crewe, what's wrong with you?'

They had reached the corner paper shop. The Crewkerne sensation had even elbowed the Irish situation off the bills of the noisier newspapers. 'MISSING HEIR TO THE MYSTERY ROOM — COLFE CASTLE SENSATION — THE SEVEN LOCKED HORROR.' They seemed to dance in a swirling ballet of big print before Frank's eyes.

'Man, you look ghastly,' said Ruddiman suddenly.

'I'm going to ask for a day off. It may be 'flu,' assented Frank. He knew it was really the other all-powerful F—Fear. Ruddiman hastened for an excuse to leave his infectious vicinity. Left alone, Frank bought a paper, skimmed two columns and walked on sedately. He was quite stunned.

In the shop where he was employed he seemed to half-wake and found himself asking for the day off, that was at once granted, on the strength of the grey pallor and haggard lines that had come to his face in the past quarter hour. After that he tramped street after street in a state of furious uncertainty.

When fury evaporated, the uncertainty was merely dreary; abysmally dreary, beyond passion. He must go to Somerset, to IT, some time. If he did not present himself very soon, the lawyers would find him; or those accursed daily papers. Besides, Rose had his address—His thoughts were brought up with a jerk. This brought Rose within his reach; it showed the immensity of the horror that the shock had made him forget even her for a while. They could marry now—if he didn't die or go mad over the preliminary ordeal. It was grotesque; the way that fate had spared the lives that stood between him and it through long years of war to sweep away all in a week of peace.

He caught himself breathing creakily, like an asthmatic or an animal whose mortally frightened heart chokes its breath. Pulling himself together, he became aware of his surroundings and inspiration was born.

The local Labour Exchange faced him. There was such a thing as a proxy, and such a person as Charles Peto; poor old Peto, desperate with the vitriolic desperation of unemployment.

It was the dreariest spot in a dreary London suburb on a dreary winter morning. The Exchange mockingly massive, trim and finished off, and suggestive of work done to last for ever. A cinema blatant on its left; on its right a block of expensive flats staring over a wide road at the file of all sorts and conditions of men and women waiting to draw their benefit. In front the pavement thick with the workless, split into groups in their degrees. Groups that ran up the crescendo of despair; from the unwashed unemployable, who grumbled comfortably together and invoked the name of the Deity only too often, up to the seedily trim elderly men and youngsters, smart with the woeful smartness that has not been able to keep up to date, who chatted airily to give spectators the impression that they had merely blown round to see if anything worth their attention

was begging to be done. Peto was there. Frank ranged beside him and edged him to the side road.

'Well, old man?' Frank asked from habit.

Peto gave a delicate little flourish with a rolled paper, as one of his ancestors might have handled a clouded cane. He was Frank's age; a man of black hair and brown skin, gaunt and faultlessly groomed in the mode of eighteen months before.

'Nothing doing at present, old thing,' he replied. When they reached the deserted part of the road, beyond the queue; 'Nothing for seven months, Crewe,' he groaned. With only a friend to see it, he could drop the mask for a moment. His face went in at jaws and temples.

'What'd you give to get away from all that, Peto?' asked Frank, a jerk of the head indicating the Exchange. 'Also to make good before Mrs. Peto?'

Peto had made an uncommon mess of his life, including a War marriage in face of violent opposition from the bride's family. Mrs. Peto was living with the said family by that time, and for many months husband and wife had not even exchanged a letter. Frank had been his confidant; he answered without thinking: 'I'd sell my soul to the Devil. . . .' The grossness of the question dawned on him. 'Why, Crewe——?' he said.

'How about a thousand a year for life with a house and grounds and work fit for a gentleman on condition you told a lie and ran a risk?' asked Frank.

II

'My dear chap, this is not a subject for joking,' Peto protested.

'Do I look jocular?' The other man pushed up the cap he had worn low down. Peto exclaimed at sight of his drawn face and haggard eyes. 'No, I'm not ill,' Frank answered to the exclamation. 'I—oh, I'm in a hole. And I want you to pull me out; conditions—a thousand a year for life, a lie and a risk. Wait!' He checked Peto's attempt to speak. 'All you know of me is that I came a mucker and was trying to earn a living in order to marry a cousin who believes in me. I did not even tell

you I changed my name to hide from my family till I'd made good. Or, rather, shortened it. It's *Crewkerne*—look!'

They were abreast of a newsagent's. He indicated the bills. 'Good lord!' said Peto, enlightened.

'I'm the missing heir. Francis Crewkerne, twentieth Baron Crewkerne of Colfe. You've seen the papers? I'm offering to appoint you Estate Steward on condition that you open the Seven Locked Room.'

Again Peto tried to speak. 'Think it over, old man, till we get to my digs,' Frank ordered.

When they were in the privacy of the little bed-sitting room Peto said slowly, 'You're afraid to be the first to enter the Room of Seven Locks.'

Frank stared out of the window and blurted: 'My life is of value to someone besides myself. You've told me there's no one to regret you. There may be danger in the Seven Locked Room.'

'Indeed!' Peto regarded the other man's back with a hint of an unbelieving smile on his own lips. 'From my youth up I have known all the floating traditions and surmises connected with the Room, but though the horror it contains may be pretty sickening, I've never heard that it has been the death of anyone yet.'

Frank's reply was swift. He spun round to jerk it out defiantly. 'Everyone who has entered it so far was introduced by someone already acquainted with the secret. Perhaps the order in which the seven locks of the door are opened may spell safety or death to whoever manipulates them.'

'Jove! I begin to see. There may be some mechanism lurking behind the door, thirsting for the blood of the unwary intruder. My dear fellow, does it not occur to you that if I lose my life entering that room I won't draw much of that thousand-a-year wherewith to dazzle my enemies-by-marriage?'

'Oh . . . !' Frank hesitated. 'I—I've thought that out. My lawyers shall advance five thousand to you at once, as a sort of retaining fee.' He looked at Peto for the first time squarely, his eyes flaming defiance. 'I'm a cur, Peto! I'm bribing you to risk your life to shield my own.'

Peto leant forward, his eyes mocking as he met the haggard glare of the other. 'Since your name is really Francis Crewkerne, I suppose you are the Second Loot. F. Crewkerne of the Tanks, who bagged the D.S.O. and only missed the V.C. by ballot?'

Frank made an irritated gesture. 'You know what that sort of thing amounts to, Peto. War's one thing; opening this Seven Locked Room in cold blood's another.'

'Precisely. Still, most men of our age would risk their lives blithely for the fun of learning the secret of the Room.'

'Any man of spirit would—if he had not been brought up with the mere chance that he might learn it hanging over his life,' Frank broke out vehemently, then stopped, faltering.

'My dear D.S.O. and almost V.C.,' said Peto, 'you're no more afraid of a possible death-trap than that cat by the fire is.'

'The trap may be there and it may not,' Frank began furiously, and changed his note. 'Oh, you're right, Peto. You've guessed it. When I was a kid I used to lie awake nights, hoping it would never be my fate to learn the secret. I could scarcely believe my luck when the War ended—that the lives between me and it had been spared. Now, when I felt most secure, it has come like lightning out of a clear sky. It's what the Room contains I fear; the sheer horror of it. I don't shirk death; I shirk the vague, incarnate horror of the Room.'

He stopped, gasping again with the intensity of his fear.

'It is hard on you,' Peto conceded, 'still, others who must have feared it from infancy must have been introduced to it——!'

'*Introduced*. That's it. They were prepared for the revelation. Everyone who has been in the Room so far has been initiated by someone else who already knew the secret.'

Peto inclined his head thoughtfully. 'I really understand now. I have not brooded on the horror all my life. For me, the only fear is a possible death-trap. Which is worth risking, to prove to my wife's people that I can provide for her. It's a bet Crewe—Lord Crewkerne. What are my orders?'

'We call at once on the family solicitors. They know me there, though not where to find me. I introduce you as the new Steward; we draw that five thousand, and you do what you like

with it. Then we take the night mail West. This evening we open the Room. You do it while I await your return. Or your death.' Frank added this in a flat way. 'You tell me what it is—'

'If I survive,' Peto interposed gently. 'If I died in the Room —what then?'

'That's my look-out. I've got to risk that.' Frank's voice rose to a defiant note. As long as he was uncertain of Peto's consent the chaotic state of his mind had kept him from realising the enormous cowardice of his plan. Now he realised, and hated himself; but he had no thought of turning back. 'And you'll make everyone believe it was I who went first,' he added. Again he corrected himself. 'If you survive!'

'That's settled,' said Peto. 'Now I must ask a question or two. Whereabouts in the Castle is the Room——?'

'Nobody knows. It's probably in the live rock on which the place is built. There's a sliding panel in the library and behind it a maze of passages and stairs leading to the Seven Locked Room.'

'I understand from your statement that the popular tale is quite true; that the Head of the Crewkerne family, his heir apparent and the Family Priest and Steward have all to learn the secret?'

'Yes, and to enter the Room at stated intervals.'

'H'm. Obviously what is in the Room requires regular attention. How far back does the history of the Room date?'

'As far back as the family does, and we owned Colfe in Arthurian times.'

'Then for about fifteen centuries something in that Room has needed the ministrations of certain attendants regularly?'

Frank looked at him, glowering with incredible horror.

'It sounds like something alive,' said Peto musingly. 'Pshaw! Alive for fifteen centuries or so?'

'A succession of live things . . .' Frank almost whispered it. 'And whatever it is, the secret is so appalling that nobody has ever betrayed it.' He shuddered. 'Peto, it has an awful effect on anyone who learns it. Why, my grand-uncle, the Lord Crewkerne who's just dead, was the worst gentleman black-

guard of the nineties in London; and after he was initiated, which happened when he was forty and fairly hardened, he turned right round and became almost a religious maniac. They say his hair turned partly white in the night he learnt the secret. Then there was his son, who died last week. In the trenches he gave a lot of us his word of honour he'd tell us the truth when he knew it. He was given special leave for his twenty-first birthday so that he might go and be initiated. When he returned, he was like a different chap and refused to tell us. He said it was better to break a gentleman's word of honour than to reveal what the Room holds.'

'Beside the proper holders of the secret, has anyone ever penetrated into the Room?'

'It's common knowledge that a guest once followed the late Lord Crewkerne secretly into the passage; but he was detected before the door was opened. It got about afterwards that before opening the door, Lord Crewkerne took a long white coat and white gloves out of a chest, and put them on. They reeked with disinfectant, and he looked like a surgeon about to operate; or so the spy said.'

Peto's eyes opened wide. 'So whatever is in the Room needs handling and must be handled with gloves soaked in disinfectant. Phew! It's getting a bit thick. What of the yarns accounting for it? Isn't there one about skeletons?'

'It is said that after King Arthur's last battle our ancestor who then owned Colfe Castle pretended to afford a refuge to the survivors of the Round Table. Actually, he shut them up in the Secret Room and let them starve, in order to curry favour from the heathen Saxon conquerors; and their skeletons are there now—the knights died after gnawing the flesh off their arms from hunger.'

'Unless the Secret Room has the gift of preserving bodies like the Bremen Lead-Chamber, those Arthurian bones must have been dust long ago,' Peto ruminated. 'Still, the legend's curious. Tales of Arthur with an exact location are more common further South and West. What of the story that a half-beast is born in your family three times in a century and kept till it dies——'

Frank reddened with indignation. 'Those putrid allegations were invented by our enemies, of course. We've always had plenty of enemies, we Crewernes of Colfe; if only because we stuck to the Old Faith through the Reformation and after.'

'Just so.' Peto rose. 'I suppose we must see about a train now.' Suddenly he laughed. 'To rehabilitate myself in the eyes of my enemies, and to learn the secret of the Seven Locked Room—and merely at the risk of death! Why, it's as much as a man could have the face to pray for in a lifetime.'

III

The legal business was absurdly easy. Messrs. Attwell & Sims fairly grovelled before a new Lord Crewkerne and his Steward. For Peto it was certainly a change from his last seven months. Mr. Attwell, the younger, was at Colfe, assisting the widowed Lady Crewkerne. The five thousand was advanced with effusion; a clerk brought it from the bank in large notes. Peto and Frank had three hours to fill in before the express started; they set a tryst at the station and separated for the time being.

Frank busied himself feverishly over settling the small affairs of Frank Crewe, motor salesman and dweller in lodgings. He reached the station in time to see Peto descend from a taxi and exchange farewells with the very pretty and radiant lady who accompanied him. She kissed him in face of the crowd and waved to him as long as the departing taxi was in view.

'My wife,' said Peto, when he turned and found Frank beside him.

'I thought——' Frank hesitated to a stop.

'We *were* dead outs.' Peto finished it for him as they threaded their way along the platform. 'I had a fancy to take those notes to her personally. In the end I never produced them after all. She only knows I have the shadow of a berth down in Somerset.'

'It's a bit sudden, isn't it?' Frank faltered.

Peto looked him steadily in the eyes. 'All real things like that are sudden. We hadn't met for a year; we both have the Devil's own pride; but when we saw one another again——' he ended

with a gesture. 'It is not true that distance always lends enchantment; you can think mean thoughts of a woman when she's away that you can't in her presence. All real things are sudden; falling in love, or repentance, or changing one's mind for the better.'

Frank's temples had burst out into cold drops. This altered the situation, and a hideous uncertainty churned his brain. His conscience had been lulled to sluggishness by Peto's agreement; it stirred now, pricked to the raw by the changing aspect of affairs.

'Your wife—if you get killed——' he exclaimed.

'Husbands are sometimes killed in the pursuit of their lawful business,' Peto replied. 'If you were killed in the Room what of your cousin—your wife to be? I have not broken into that five thousand yet; nor entered into the duties of my new post,' he added with significance.

'You want to back out?'

'No. I merely offer you a chance to change your mind.'

They were in their reserved compartment by now; doors were beginning to bang. Frank hesitated, then blurted 'Peto, old chap, I lied to you. About a trap behind the door, you know——'

'I know. I knew it at the time. You are an unconvincing liar; your eyes betray you. Why did you do it?'

'Because I know you don't fear plain death; but I thought that if you understood it was sheer terror of what's in the Room that made me funk going in first, you might cry off.'

'My dear fellow, I've not brooded over it all my life——'

He stopped short. Frank had turned his head to glance at the guard who had come to lock their door; stared past the man and dashed out to intercept a girl who was hurrying along the platform.

'Rose!' he exclaimed.

'Frank!' the tall girl was less surprised than he was and more pleased. 'You're going to Colfe, of course. Poor Aunt Mary wired me this morning and I've just got down from York.'

He hustled her into the compartment while she spoke and the door was slammed. While the train gave a preliminary

shiver and started to glide, he made the introductions confusedly.

'Rose, I've mentioned Charlie Peto in my letters. He's Steward now. Peto, I've told you of my cousin, Miss Crewkerne.'

Rose Crewkerne was a slim pleasant specimen of the out-of-doors Englishwoman; handsome with the contrasting attractions of dark hair, fair skin and unfathomable brown eyes. The eyes met Peto's with frank anxiety and seemed reassured by what they saw.

'You two are going down to open the Seven Locked Door, Mr. Peto?' she said bluntly.

Peto made demure reply. 'As steward I am to be initiated into the Room by Crewe—Lord Crewkerne.'

'"Crewkerne" to you, Peto,' Frank broke in. 'Rose, I go in first; he follows. No, I'm not playing up to your lead, Peto,' he added fiercely, 'I go into that Room first.'

'Of course. It's your duty,' said Rose. She leant forward.

'You first, Frank—and then Mr. Peto and I—'

'You, Rose?' Frank stammered.

'Why, Frank, don't you remember the Barony's not in tail male? Owing to the complicated decimation of the family I am your heiress apparent. I'm twenty-one and entitled to learn the secret.'

Frank stared at her dumbly. Peto leant back in his corner and smiled a tight little smile, like one who watches a gentle comedy. Rose went on: 'Frank, dear, you remember how we used to talk of the secret together when we were children, and hoped it would never come our way? You are afraid still, although you don't show it.'

'I'm deadly afraid, Rose, whether I show it or not.'

'You don't, but I know you are. And you are hurrying down to meet it.' Her voice brimmed with glad satisfaction.

Peto leant further back and the smile tucked in his lips. A change had come to Frank's face. It was still haggard, the blue eyes even more feverish and afraid, but the furtive look that had marred both eyes and features was gone.

'You must not think too well of me, Rose my dear,' he said quietly. 'Ten minutes ago I meant to be second in the Room. I

shall tell it all, Peto!' He flashed a defiant look at the other man. 'You have nothing to fear from the telling.'

'I wondered from the first how long you could keep it up,' Peto laughed back, 'I thought perhaps as far as the door, but certainly not further. I know you better than you know yourself.'

Frank reddened. 'Thank you, old man. Only don't think too well of me now. Rose, Peto said just now that you could think mean thoughts of a woman in her absence that you can't entertain in her presence. While you weren't here, I could think of letting you marry a coward and a liar. With you here, I can't.'

He set out the whole story of the day, boldly, from start to finish. The girl listened without comment to the end; then she said: 'Now you have made up your mind to work out your salvation, Frank, don't you feel less afraid of the Room?'

He sat rigid, awaiting what she would say, after he had answered; 'It's worse than ever. My scalp's creeping with it. I think I almost fear it more than I fear what you think of me, Rose.'

For a moment she looked in his eyes as though she were undecided about something. Then 'Why, Frank, you might understand me as well as Mr. Peto understands you!' she exclaimed, her voice very deep and tender. 'There's nothing more to be said, is there, Mr. Peto?' She smiled full at the other man. 'You two will enter the Room and call me when it is safe for me. That's all, isn't it?'

Frank drew in a sharp breath that was almost a sob.

'Thank God for your understanding Rose. And I thank Him also because you won't insist on entering the Room with me.'

Her eyes almost flinched. 'I would never dare to enter that Room unless I were called in,' she returned.

There was no more to be said about it. By tacit agreement they spent the rest of the long journey in discussing other family matters. Only Peto the observant saw that the fear the new Lord Crewkerne was keeping in check was intensifying with every mile. And in Rose's eyes he read a deepening emotion whenever she thought she was looking at Frank

unobserved. It puzzled Peto the observer; for her look expressed yearning pity rather than fear.

IV

At Wells a motor waited; darkness closed in before it landed them in the courtyard at Colfe. The night was clear and full of stars; the ragged bulk of the building blocked out half the sky overhead—black, ominous of the secret it held.

With his predecessor awaiting burial in the castle chapel, it was a ghastly homecoming for the new Lord Crewkerne. He bore himself well enough through the ordeal of business to be done with the lawyers, with the head servants, with the priests in temporary charge of the chapel; but ever the fear grew in his eyes. Lady Crewkerne was prostrate with grief and could see no one but Rose. At long last he found himself with Peto in the library.

It was lit, but the servants had omitted to shade the windows, and the gas mingled garishly with the starlight that straggled through the blazoned glass above them. Peto examined a bunch of keys, seven-numbered, one plain. With the plain one he unlocked a small door in the oak panelling, then he handed the bunch to Frank. Frank waited with his hand on the door-knob.

Rose came in and turned the key in the library door behind her. 'We'll get it over now,' she said in quite a commonplace voice. Across the room she looked at Frank; her face was white now; she paused as though held dumb and still by too much emotion, and seemed to summon her voice by an effort.

'Where there's no fear, there's no danger to body, brain or soul!' she cried out suddenly, as though appealing for confirmation of her words rather than stating a fact she believed.

Frank smiled at her. His lips smiled, but his forehead glistened wetly and his eyes were almost blank. 'I am deadly afraid—afraid in body, brain and soul,' he replied, almost gaspingly, and led the way in.

They entered a stone-lined passage which ended in a stair-

case leading down to another gallery. In all, there were four passages and four staircases; the last stair landed them in a little vault hewn in the live rock. Frank flashed round the light of the lamp he bore, and showed at the opposite end a door, set well back in a niche. On it were seven locks of varying sizes and beside it stood an old oak chest.

Frank's heart raced madly; he could feel it beat in his teeth as he clenched them. Peto opened the chest and they saw a white garment and a pair of white gauntlets, all of fine linen and exhaling a drug-like odour.

'Dusters and a broom,' said Rose, pointing to a bundle of dried vegetable stalks and a pile of clean linen napkins that also lay in the chest. Her voice was tense and strangled, with the suggestion of a laugh at the back of it. To Frank it suggested incipient hysteria and the need for helping her brought strength to him. He smiled at her, quietly reassuring, found the key that fitted each lock and turned them. Then he waved the other two aside, pulled the door open with the last key, and stepped in.

Rose and Peto waited in darkness. Peto heard the rustle of the girl's garments and knew she had backed along the wall away from the door. In the deadly hush he could hear her breathing in little gasps. Her need braced him as it had braced Frank; he reached a hand back and pressed her arm reassuringly.

Frank had stopped dead, with a click of his heels on the threshold. The light danced through the cracks between the hinges of the outstanding door. Then in the silence he gave a little cry that was half gasp and half a sob. 'Oh Rose! Come—Come!' he called in a voice that was at once hushed and vibrant.

Peto stepped to the edge of the door and stood staring. From the opening came a waft of scent like that on the white garments. The Secret Room was a cube cut out in the rock; small and plain. In the wall opposite the door a niche had been carved, breast-high, and in it white lawn, bunched loosely as though to make a soft resting place and flowing out to the floor. Amidst the lawn was set a Silver Bowl, tarnished with age. As he stood, Peto could see into the Bowl, and certain dark smears on the bottom of it. That was all, but Peto's tongue clave to the

roof of his mouth, and his knees were loosened as there rushed into his mind incredible memories of certain half-forgotten things.

Frank had set his lamp on a ledge and was on his knees with his face buried in his hands.

A Bowl—a Silver Bowl! Peto dare not frame the suggestion even in his mind. Rose slipped past him; cast one timid glance at the niche, and knelt beside Frank. At last Peto dared to believe.

‘THE SAN GREAL!’ he almost sobbed and almost whimpered. And he also sank on his knees and hid his face.

V

The awe of it was so utter that no word was spoken until they had crept from the place and were in the outer vault with the seven locks turned again. Then Rose broke down, gently.

She sobbed on Frank’s shoulder for a little while and Peto did not feel at all in the way. ‘You would have been sorry for the rest of your life, Frank, if I had not let you redeem yourself to the end,’ she said at last, recovering command of herself as quietly as she had lost it.

‘You knew all the time, dear?’ Somehow it did not surprise Frank, much less Peto, who now understood what had puzzled him in her demeanour. ‘You were right as always, Rose. How could I have faced the Holy Grail with my cowardice unatoned?’ He shuddered.

‘If you earned the right to face it unashamed by conquering your cowardice, I earned it too, by allowing you to do that conquering,’ she answered. ‘For oh, it was hard to keep from telling you! I suffered for you all the way from London!’

Frank could only smile at her gravely. When they were back in the library: ‘You knew the secret, Miss Crewkerne?’ Peto asked.

‘When I was here a year ago I found some old papers, and amongst them was a bill for an iron-bound door, seven locks and hewing out a chamber in the castle foundations. The date

was 1540, so it looked as though the hidden room only dated from that year. I could not help guessing then. The year was so significant—for the one before, 1539—is infamous, in Somerset annals, as the one in which Abbot Whiting of Glastonbury was executed for “Robbing the Church”. Everyone knows that means he hid away consecrated vessels and holy relics from the ruffians Henry VIII sent to seize them. Glastonbury is near here—there was a report in the papers some years ago that the Greal had been found in a disused well there—the secret simply flashed into my mind at once. I knew that as good is as powerful as evil, something unimaginably holy must account for the effect of the Colfe Secret on those who learned it, as well as something horrible would. And what could be holier than the most sacred relics in Christendom—the San Greal; the vessel used at the Last Supper and—’ the girl’s voice broke. ‘I was ashamed at having found out such a secret. So I confessed it to Uncle—I mean the late Lord Crewkerne, Mr. Peto—and he told me I was right. Abbot Whiting entrusted the Greal to the Crewkerne; to be hidden away and guarded until the time when all the jarring sects of Christianity shall realise they are one and bottom and merge together again.

‘Oh, it is very easy to understand once one gets away from the vulgar idea that only vulgar horror could explain the Colfe Secret. It was awe that turned Uncle from a libertine to a pious man. He told me everything; even about the myrrh-soaked gloves and vestment he had to wear when he swept out the shrine.

‘And he did not make me promise not to betray the Secret,’ she ended. ‘If he had, I might have broken my word to comfort you, Frank; but as he did not—you know!’

The men nodded. One cannot break an unspoken promise.

‘Thank God he did not bind you,’ said Frank. ‘If you had been tempted—and had told me—’

He shivered; for he saw himself entering the awful presence of the Greal with his cowardice unatoned.

CREEPING FINGERS

LORETTA G. BURROUGHS

I WAS SO dead tired that the snow swirling about my face, and the cold wind blowing in chill gusts down the side streets, were the only things that kept me from falling asleep on my feet. Had it not been for the storm I could have cheerfully leaned against a wall and closed my eyes, but its fierce violence drove me onward through the snow drifting high, and the fierce blasts of the mid-western blizzard. I kept saying to myself 'Not much farther now, and then a bath and bed', but it was queer how the few blocks from the station to the hotel stretched themselves. An Olympic runner at the end of a long race could not have been more tired than I when at last I crawled through the revolving doors into the hot, glaring warmth of the foyer of the Hoffman House, Benton's hotel.

I wanted only one thing, room and bath, and said as much to the drowsy night clerk stodgily on duty at the desk.

'Room and bath, sir?' he said, conserving his words with the economy of the weary. 'Fraid not.'

'What do you mean, "Fraid not"?' I demanded.

'Convention here at Benton. No room.'

'No room! Well, where the devil do you expect me to sleep? I've been travelling two days and nights and a bath and room I will have.'

I was angry, with the sudden heat of the worn-out. We stood at an impasse, I glaring heatedly at the clerk and he staring dazedly at me, quite unable in his experience to find any solution to the problem.

'What's this, Kennedy? Being insolent to a guest?' A large robust gentleman stood at my elbow.

The clerk shuffled into an alert attitude.

'No, sir. Mr. Hardy, this gentleman wants a room and bath, and I was telling him on account of the convention we haven't any.'

'You see,' I explained. 'I'm dog tired. I've been on the road for weeks; I've just made a long sleeper jump and I want a room and bath. This is the only decent hotel in town—so I came here.'

'I see, sir,' the manager was very deferential. 'Well, we'll see if we can't possibly fix you up. Are *all* the rooms occupied?' he asked, turning to the clerk.

'Yes, Mr. Hardy.'

'Um . . . this convention . . . Well, how about 317?'

'That's empty, of course.'

'Um—'

'Well,' I said, breaking in as the prospect of a haven began to show through the murk. 'If 317's unoccupied, I shall take it!'

The manager stood there a moment, saying nothing.

'You see,' he began. '317's not occupied much. People complain of the location or something; they say it's too cold. I shouldn't advise you to take the room, sir. People don't like it. However, it *is* the only unoccupied one tonight. It has a bath attached.'

'I don't care anything about the location. If there isn't any objection, I shall take it. Particularly since it has a bath attached.'

'Well, perhaps I should suggest, if you just took the room, and didn't use the bath? The bath isn't opened much, it's rather damp. People don't like it.'

I stood staring at him, wondering what ailed this manager who could find so few good points about his rooms. He had been anxious enough to find a place for me before. But I could not pause to wonder about his vagaries. With all its drawbacks, real or imaginary, 317 had begun to appear to me a haven of rest.

'I shall take it, damp, bad location, chilly, everything *with* bath attached.'

The manager stood there a moment longer, then with a shrug, said 'Certainly, sir', and called 'Front!'

The boy took my bags, which by now I thought had begun to wear through the muscles of my shoulders, and led me to a gusty elevator that creaked its way upwards for two storeys, then along hot and carpeted corridors, past closed doors through which I could hear blasts of merry-making from the convention, into a long and narrow passage, remote and quiet, and noticeably chilly and draughty. He paused before a door at one end of the corridor, and began to fumble with the key in the lock. I stood beside him, noticing the quiet of the passage as compared with the robust noise of the other corridors.

'Very quiet here, isn't it?' I said.

'Yes, sir.' The boy looked up. 'You see, this is the only bedroom on this gallery. The others,' he gestured to other dark brown doors opening out onto the worn, red-carpeted hall, 'are just store-rooms for odds and ends, and linen, and things like that. This room ain't used much, it ain't used at all, that's to say. Not lately, that is. It's sort of damp and chilly, people say.'

'Damp and chilly? Why should it be damp and chilly? This isn't the season.'

'I dunno, sir.' The boy had the key in the lock and the door opened. A gust of swamp like chill rushed out to meet us, as palpable as a rush of wind.

'Shut the windows in here,' I said, advancing into the room behind him. 'It's damned cold.'

'They're shut, sir,' he muttered, slipping the electric switch and letting a flood of chill white light over the room.

I went over to the flaky radiator immediately and bent to turn on the heat. The steam immediately hissed through the pipes loudly. 'It's funny,' I said, looking at the boy, who stood near the door. 'This room's as cold as the inside of a tomb.'

'Yes, sir. People complain about it and don't stay.'

'Well, I don't care.' I looked about me once more. 'All I want is a bath and a bed to sleep in.'

'Yes, sir.' I handed him his tip and he hurried out, his footsteps beating a rapid retreat down the corridor, toward warmth, I fancied.

The cheerless room was still as cold as the inside of a refrigerator car, although the heat was now dancing through the pipes and quivering above the radiator. 'It'll have to warm up soon,' I said to myself, and began to take off my clothes. When I had got half-way undressed to the tune of the noisy pipes and the battering of the wind and the sleet, I went to the bathroom to turn on the hot water for my bath.

When I entered the room, I was startled. It was almost as large as an old-fashioned kitchen; it was cold, and damp, and dark, and the huge old tub had high sides. It looked like one of those old monstrosities that had been current in the early days of plumbing, and the whole room had an air of being out of place. It was hideous and cheerless.

I shivered and went back to the cold bedroom, well understanding the state of mind that could prompt people to give up the barren, unpleasant room. I sat on the edge of the bed, half-awake, and listened to the monotonous sound of the bath filling. It was the only noise I could hear, although I listened carefully. No sound of distant revelry reached me, no noises from the street. I got up and moved to the window, pulling aside the skimpy curtain. I looked down upon a cheerless row of empty stables around a dark alley, utterly lonely and abandoned-looking, under the faint light of a feeble arc. Over everything the snow eddied about in drifting gusts.

'God!' I said. 'What a prospect! That and the cold combined must have discouraged the tenants.'

I turned back into the room, wondering why an hotel could be such an incredibly dreary place, particularly a country hotel. After a while, when the bath began to sound as if it were full, I picked up my fresh pyjamas and opened the bathroom door. I stared a moment, gasped, and pulled on the electric light switch. The light from the high white globe streaked out over the bare room and the deep shadow cast by the basin, into the bottom of the tub, filled with green water swirling and steaming, sending up hot smoke into the cold air.

I gazed a long moment into the bottom of the tub and laid my pyjamas over the side of the stool, shivering and feeling decidedly ill. For in that long moment before I had switched on the light I had fancied that I had seen someone lying supine in the water. I went over to it and gazed down into the depths, between the chill greyish marble sides to the bottom, where the hot water was steaming and gurgling and bubbling, as the cascade from the pipe fell fountain-like downward. It was empty; the faint shadow that I stooped down to touch was my own, cast by the ceiling light, like a small sun, that hung obliquely above my head. I shivered a bit in the damp air, despite the hot vapour of the steam that was now filling the room, the air was still chill and faintly redolent of the earth, the odour of a necropolis in the rain. I looked about me, and wondered where the odour could be coming from, and what made these two rooms so cheerless and repulsive and, I fancied, so malignant. And what was it I fancied I had seen prostrate in the bottom of the tub?

I went back to the doorway and stared again into the room, at the tub, after switching off the light. The little oblong of yellow light from the bedroom streamed in upon the greyish marble of the floor and my shadow stood before me, long and inquiring, with distorted head turned questioningly toward the high bulk in the corner of the room, but that was all. There was nothing lying long and horribly supine and limp in the bottom of the high white tub.

I grunted, whether in satisfaction or in annoyance at myself, I could not tell, turned on the light, slipped off my bath-robe and stood testing the heat of the water with my finger. I let a little cold water out of the faucet and then got into the tub. I had realised how high the thing was when I stood looking at it, but when I lay down in it the white sides seemed to come together suddenly over my head and I sat up, startled. The depth of it was extraordinary; and I decided that it must certainly have originated in some bygone age of plumbing, for such monstrosities were not tolerated today. Sitting upright as I was, the top of the tub was on a level with my eyes, and, lying down, I could see nothing but its sides and the high, cold-

looking globe of the ceiling light which shed its sickly glow over the room.

But I was tired, worn out, and the water that gurgled loudly from the pipes in the silence was hot and soothing to my weary body and fatigued nerves. Hideous though the room was, hard the storm that banged at the window, and cold and repulsive the tub, at least I could build for myself with hot water and soap a little haven against the harshness of my surroundings.

I lay down in the bottom, and again experienced the sudden sensation that the sides were closing around me, but this time I did not sit up, for I was growing warm and sleepy. Sleep, like a hot blanket, was closing around my nerves and brain. I lay still and may have dozed, thinking of home and the happy fact that I should soon be there.

Then, slowly, I began to grow conscious again, dully, sleepily, with my brain functioning as in a dream. I grew aware of the fact, as if beneath a layer of wool that was gently numbing my faculties, that somewhere near at hand a door had very softly closed. I lay there awhile softly mulling it over, drawing from it no meaning, foggily arguing with myself, wondering. One of the servants perhaps had closed a door along the corridor. No, it had sounded nearer than that, much nearer. I didn't know. I couldn't bother. I was growing drowsy again, sinking easily along a pleasant path down to a blissful know-nothingness, when a voice within my brain shouted violently: 'Wake up; save yourself!'

My eyes jerked open, as if by cords that had suddenly contracted, and the sweat of sudden fright stood out on my forehead. Convulsively, every muscle in my body jerked and stiffened, and my hands closed into fists. What was it, that sudden voice that shocked me into alertness, what was it that had startled me out of the mists of weariness and sleep, what was there to be afraid of? I stared about me and sat up. Nothing was changed in the room, nothing was out of order. The cheerless cracked sink still stood in the corner and one of its taps still drearily dripped; over the peeling yellow stool were thrown my clean pyjamas and a towel, and my tooth

brush and the red tube of paste still lay upon the basin. Whence, then, came that extraordinarily impression that something was different? Nothing was different; the air was still as funereally cold, the storm still sucked about the windows, and yet change there was; something had changed that, subconsciously, I did not like. I stared at the sides of the tub, turned away, then violently turned back. What were they, those pools of mist?

On a level with my eyes, upon the chill surface of the marble edge were five little circles of mist, fluctuating, moving and ominous. I couldn't understand them, and I stared again. Five pools of mist spaced unevenly apart, four close together and one a little distance of a few inches away from the others. Suddenly they lifted and dissolved away; then again they reappeared, a little nearer to me, at a different place. Stupidly I put out my hand and laid it on the side of the marble to brace myself, lifted it off again and stared at the impression of five circles of rapidly dissolving mist that it had left. What was it then, whose five fingers made those little pools of mist—just like the fading spots left by my fingers—what was it, then, that had laid its hand on the side of the tub?

I crowded back against the far wall and watched that marble expanse where the five imprints moved. An instant, and suddenly with a pounce the impression of the five fingers was not alone. A foot away, and as clearly and distinctly as warm fingerprints on ice, the imprint of another hand stood out, and immediately I became conscious of the change in the room that had bothered me before. I looked breathlessly toward the door, and saw, instead of the lamp with its circle of light on the bedroom table, only the closed dark brown panels of the bathroom door. It was shut and I had left it open. What, then, was it that had come through the door, softly shutting it behind it when I was half-asleep? What, then, was it that was shut up with me in the room and had its invisible hands on the side of the tub? I looked at the pools of mist, not calmly, but with a choking sensation that I had become entangled in a web of madness, that it was a horrible nightmare and could not last. I could not move; my starting eyes were fixed on those melting

and moving impressions on the marble. Another moment and I could find my voice and cry out, but not now. Suddenly I could almost see the marble spurned; the fingerprints were gone; malignantly, the hands were free. Something that I could not see was coming at me over the sides of the tub.

I turned my head away, and cried out in a voice that terror lent power. I felt myself slipping darkly into the water, sensation ebbing away into a chill blackness that was quiet and cold and burned with light that dashed across darkness——

‘Now,’ a voice was speaking very far away. ‘When he wakes up give him something very light, Miss Daly, nothing heavy, not even if he asks for it. And remember, absolutely no conversation. If he wants to talk, if he starts asking questions, refuse to speak to him. I’ll be in the first thing in the morning.’

The voices moved away and I opened my eyes, painfully. I was warmly heaped with blankets and the fresh odour of clean wool filled the room. The place was unfamiliar and warm, and a spoon stood in a glass on a table and beside it a bottle. I opened my mouth to call and found I could not. My throat was exceedingly raw and felt as if I had been smothered in water, but I lay there, my eyes on the bright glow of the unfamiliar lamp and my brain idly tracing its pattern on the shade. I knew there were things I should be thinking of, puzzling over, but with every muscle aching and my whole body and brain a raw torture, I wanted only to sleep.

The door opened and the nurse came in, brisk, pleasant, bright-faced. ‘Awake are you? How do you feel?’

‘Sick,’ I groaned. ‘What’s all this about, anyhow? Where am I?’

‘Never mind.’ She busied herself with the peculiar industriousness which is the characteristic of nurses. ‘You’re to rest and sleep, and that’s absolutely all. Now I’ll get you some tea and toast.’

She was gone, and when she came back with the food, I ate it, and went to sleep soon after.

A week later, I was sitting in the office of the manager of the Hoffman House, a glass at my side and a cigar between my lips and listening.

'Well,' he began, rather awkwardly, his eyes on the rug beneath his feet. 'I'm awfully sorry about this matter, Mr. Kent. I know it's been a terrible experience for you.'

I nodded and before my eyes rose the picture of that damp, chill room, the wisps of steam from the bath curling up into the dank air, and the high walls of the great tub rising about me and shutting out everything except the frozen-looking globe of the light. And again I seemed to hear a door close softly, and again I seemed to stare at changing pools of mist moving on a marble surface. I shuddered and lifted the full glass to my lips. I could never forget that experience; a week of trying had only dimmed the first raw horror a little.

'Now,' I said, setting down the glass suddenly 'I want to hear an explanation. I have been put off for a week and the whole thing haunts me. Please tell me what it means.'

'I don't know that I should tell you. Perhaps the whole thing might be better forgotten. Of course, you know the rooms are being dismantled and will only be used again for storage?'

I nodded. I had heard the sounds of hammering and moving going on near me for several days; and I had asked the nurse what they were doing. I was glad they were breaking up the rooms. At least they would no longer have a concrete existence——

He took his gaze from the carpet and looked at me.

'This whole thing happened before I became manager of the hotel, so I had no personal knowledge of the matter . . . Anyhow, you want to hear what happened the night you were in there.' He gestured toward the ceiling, and I knew that he referred to my unfortunate occupancy of room 317 with bath.

'Yes,' I said, and he went on.

'That night everything was going on quite as usual when I happened to stroll down the corridor on which 317 was situated.' He paused and seemed to shiver. 'I was going to check up on the housekeeper's tally of the linen, which hadn't quite suited me, and I noticed how infernally damp the passage was. This was about half-past eleven, you know, about an hour after you'd gone up to the room. I went into the store-room, and was taking stock of the linen in the closets and so forth, when I

heard you yell. Well,' he paused and took a sip from his glass. 'I ran out into the corridor—I knew where the sound came from, of course—called for help at the top of my voice and then tried to get the door open. In a minute there was a crowd of bellboys and guests around me, and all together we broke down the door. Well, you weren't in the bedroom so we went to the bathroom door. It wasn't locked because it hadn't any key, you know, but we couldn't open it. And all the time we could hear you inside, drowning. We didn't waste any time, as you can imagine. We broke the door down at last and got you out just in time. The doctor said a little more immersion would have finished you. I had you brought to the best room in the hotel, got a doctor and a nurse, and here you are—'

He looked up, and smiled, and I realized that the experience was one that the manager of the Hoffman House would not forget very quickly. Standing in that damp cold corridor alone and hearing me cry for help in the accents of insane fright was something that would tend to remain in a man's memory.

'Yes,' I said, 'here I am, a little the worse for wear and very bewildered.' I told him my story, from my first impressions of the room to my last moment when I felt myself sinking into the deep water. When I finished, he nodded very quickly.

'I thought it was something like that. The rooms have a vile reputation; it's just as well they're being broken up. I'll tell their story and perhaps it will explain things a little. I don't know. Anyhow,' he took another long drink from the glass at his elbow and resumed, '317 was taken three years and a week ago, to be exact, by two men, an old man very feeble and a much younger man, uncle and nephew they were. That night the young man drowned his uncle in the bath-tub and disappeared. He was tracked down later and hanged.'

I shivered. The rooms had been the scene of murder, then. No wonder their air of being consecrated to evil. The door that had been shut so strangely on the night that I was there had been shut those years before by the murderer. Just so had he crept in, hidden by the high sides of the tub, then, when the old man lay unsuspecting, laid his hands on the side of the marble and a moment later. . . . It must have been easy to do, consider-

ing the age of the victim and the youth and strength of the murderer, to push him beneath the water and hold him there until his last struggles were over. I shivered at the ugly picture and the strange closeness of my escape.

'That's not all,' the manager went on. 'The next year it didn't happen to be occupied on the fifteenth. The year after that, last year, it was occupied and a man was found drowned in the tub the next morning—accidentally we thought, of course. And the night you were there was the third anniversary. You see, I wasn't manager at the time all these things happened and I didn't have the facts at first hand, or I would have thought twice about letting you take the room. But you were so insistent, so I . . . anyhow, I've had one coincidence too many; so the rooms are being torn down and won't be used for living purposes any more.'

'A damn' good thing,' I said, picking up my hat from the table and lifting my suitcase.

OUT OF THE EARTH

FLAVIA RICHARDSON

ANTONY WAYRE felt that he could never forget the horror of that night. Even when the actual experience had been forgotten and lived down, there would be intervals of madness when the whole scene was reconstructed in his memory. What Sylvia, his wife, thought no one knew, for she kept it closely to herself. All her energies were given to keeping Antony from brooding.

It often happened without any preliminary warning whatever. Antony and Sylvia had bought a small cottage called 'Roman's' in Gloucestershire. Since the war, Antony had been indefinite in his plans, unable to get a decent job anywhere that would bring in sufficient for their wants and yet give him time to go on with his own writing. Then, at the end of 1924, his godmother was killed in a motor smash and he found himself the possessor of five hundred pounds a year, long before, in the ordinary course of events, it would have fallen to his lot.

He and Sylvia had at once started to look for a country cottage where they could settle down. With what he expected to make by writing, Antony judged they could manage well on his new income by living quietly. Sylvia, who was fond of gardening and of a country life, planned to breed chickens and ducks for their own use as well as to grow fruit and vegetables.

After much hunting, they found 'Roman's' and knew it was the home of their choice. The cottage was small and compact, built at the top of a hill, two miles from the village but only a quarter of an hour's walk across the fields from a small market town. The nearest neighbour lived at the bottom of the hill.

The first month they were there passed without noticeable event. They were both in love with the house, both busy all day and tired and healthy enough to sleep perfectly at night. Had they not done so, it is just possible they might have had some warning of the horror that was to come upon them.

Shortly after Christmas, Antony Wayre went to dine with the doctor who lived in the house at the foot of the hill. Sylvia was invited, but there was a thick white mist from the valley which had risen even to their altitudes and as she had a bad cough and cold she decided to stay at home by the fire.

Antony, being a good husband and remembering that his wife was alone in the house—for their daily help went as soon as she had laid the supper—did not stay long with the doctor and was walking up the hill again by half-past ten.

The mist was rolling up in strange white shapes, and by the time he had reached his own garden gate he could not see the lights from the doctor's house, nor any of those from the out-lying villas of the town, usually to be seen through the trees. He pulled his scarf up more closely round his throat and shivered a little.

Suddenly he was aware of a strange feeling in the garden; it was hard to define; hard to pin down to anything in the least definite, yet it was strong enough for him to stand still and peer around. He was strangely conscious of the presence of a second person.

The feeling was so strong that Antony called out sharply, 'Who's there?' wondering if some thief were hiding in the garden with intent to despoil the chicken run. But there was no answer; the white mist rolled up in deeper waves till it seemed to engulf him. It was becoming hard—with the mist and the darkness—to see even the garden path, in spite of his electric torch.

Shrugging his shoulders, Antony went on to the hall door. Rather to his surprise, it was bolted. He knocked twice, and as he did so the feeling that he was accompanied grew stronger.

A minute later Sylvia opened the door and half dragged him into the hall, shutting and bolting with feverish intensity.

'Hello! What's up?' said Antony naturally surprised. Then,

remembering his own sensations, he asked as casually as he could, 'Have you been frightened? Did you think you heard someone about?'

Sylvia laughed nervously and backed into the drawing room.

'No, oh no,' she said, 'only—it's the first time you've been out without me and I suppose I got a little nervous. There's a nasty mist up, isn't there? The house seems full of it.'

Antony knew his wife too well to take her words at face value. He could see that she was on the verge of hysteria and cursed himself soundly for having left her alone, even for a few hours. He ought to have remembered that she was not used to the country and that the silence was bound to affect her nerves.

Very deliberately, with the impression of infusing an air of everyday life into the situation, he divested himself of coat and scarf and put his stick into the stand, then lit a cigarette. Then he went back into the drawing-room where Sylvia was waiting for him, the door wide open so that she could watch him in the hall. The room was, as she had said, decidedly full of mist, but it was not too badly lit for him to see that her eyes were wide with horror and her hands trembling as she sat down and picked up her knitting, making a feeble pretence at normality.

'Sylvia, what is it?' Antony spoke sharply. His own nerve was beginning to falter. 'What has happened? Why are you frightened?'

She lifted her eyes from her work and gazed at him.

'Tony, Tony,' she began, and her voice held a throb of fear in it. 'Tony, I don't know what it is, but there's something dreadful about this house tonight. It—the feeling, I mean—came on about an hour ago; I've been sitting here, praying you wouldn't be very late. I began to think I should go mad.'

Antony shook off the creeping horror that was beginning to possess him also. 'Nonsense, darling,' he said, as cheerfully as he could, 'You aren't feeling very fit; your cold's pulled you down and your nerves have given out. I was a fool to leave you tonight; forgive me, dear. I'll make some cocoa, shall I? And we'll have it by the fire before we go to bed.'

His effort at normality seemed to pull her together, but she would not leave him alone. Almost clinging to his coat, she

went with him to the tiny kitchen and helped to fetch the kettle and the tin of cocoa. Curiously enough, there was hardly any mist in the kitchen; it seemed to have concentrated in the drawing-room.

'Something to do with the aspect of the house,' Antony thought to himself, but he did not comment on it to his wife.

Over the cocoa, Sylvia seemed to become happier, though she jumped badly when a log fell out of the fire on to the hearth.

'What did you talk about at the doctor's?' she asked.

Antony shrugged his shoulders. 'Everything,' he said with a smile. 'The birth and death rate of the village, poultry feeding—by the way, he's got some wonderful food mixture he thinks you'd like to try—local history and so on. He told me that there used to be a Roman settlement here, and that's why this cottage is called "Roman's". Apparently at one time it was a pretty big place and then it died out. But every now and then the farmers turn up old weapons and things when they are ploughing.'

Sylvia nodded. 'I wonder if the hens will scratch up anything,' she said. 'They work hard enough. I believe they are going to do well. It's a bad time of year to start them, though.'

'I suppose so,' Antony spoke sleepily. 'What about a move upstairs? That fire has almost burnt itself out.'

As the words left his mouth he became aware once more of that other presence. For the last few minutes it had left him; now it was back, and even more strongly than before. He glanced at Sylvia. She was looking over her shoulder at the door, and there was fear in her eyes.

'I—I don't think I wan't to go to bed just yet,' she said in a strained voice. 'Antony, I'm afraid. It's come back again.'

'Don't be silly, dear,' he said encouragingly, and all the time knowing that it was he who would be silly if he set foot outside the door. Somehow he knew that It—the Horror—was in the hall—that he himself might have paved the way for its entrance when he came into the house.

The lamp gave a sudden flicker and then went out; the oil had been exhausted. Sylvia gave a little cry of dismay. The room was now only lit by the dying fire. Antony dashed to the window and dragged back the curtains. The mist had lifted and

a pale moon shed a gleam on to the floor and the grand piano.

Antony went to the grate and picked up the poker, all the while aware that it was a useless weapon. Then he went towards the door. Whatever It was out there, he meant to face it; he could not endure the thought of being beaten in his own house. But as he laid a hand on the door knob, he drew back. Something was on the other side; something so strong, so definitely evil that every fibre of his soul recoiled by instinct from facing it. He could not co-ordinate his muscles; for a moment he stood still, dumb. Then he pulled his scattered senses together and turned round.

Sylvia was standing behind him, white as the moonlight; her eyes big and dark, her fingers moving tremulously. Antony went up to her and slipped an arm round her waist.

'Darling!' he said, 'We've got to see this thing through.'

'What is it? What is it, Tony?' she asked, half sobbing.

'God only knows—or the devil,' he returned grimly.

His arm round her waist still, they retreated to the far end of the room. Their eyes were seemingly compelled to remain on the door. Would It come in? What did It want? When would It go away?

After what seemed hours of waiting, Sylvia gave a little cry and pointed to the floor. Antony followed the direction of her finger. Over the threshold, under the door, was coming a slow, thick, greenish vapour that rose slightly in the air as it was forced into the room by the pressure of a further discharge behind.

'My God!' gasped Antony. 'What's that?'

Clinging to one another, backs against the wall, they watched and waited, while the vapour increased in volume till it seemed to fill a quarter of the little sitting-room. Then they realised that it was, as it were, kept in confines of its own. That was in one way the most horrible thing about it. It did not spread and diffuse as gas would do, but it moved in a solid block with cumulus edges.

For a moment or two nothing more occurred; then Sylvia cried out again. 'It's taking shape!' Staring, horror-stricken, they saw that this was indeed the case. Out of that solid wall

of greenish gas—a foul, horrible green that reminded them of rotting slime and duckweed—certain portions were moulding together, were becoming a form. And as the Horror did this, so did the foul smell grow greater, till they could hardly breathe the air around them. It was suffocating them.

Antony made a supreme effort and without loosing his hold on Sylvia, jerked his elbow through the window. The raw night air came in with a rush, but it could not dispel the vapour inside. The edges of the block wavering a little for a moment, but that was all.

Sylvia was sobbing quietly, burying her head on Antony's shoulder, trying to shut out the sight. A sudden catch of his breath made her look up again, and she shuddered, sick with fear.

The form was growing clearer now; the central part of the green gas had become a being, an entity such as they had never seen before. Swaying backward and forward, raised slightly above the floor but without visible means of support, was a travesty of a man—grotesquely limbed and featured. But the chief horror lay in the expression. Never had Antony or Sylvia conceived that such bestiality, such foulness could live in any semblance of the human face. It seemed incarnate evil, and it swayed toward them with a leer, coming imperceptibly closer every moment.

Antony's back was against the wall; he could retreat no further. Sylvia lay on his arm, half fainting with terror.

Somehow, by some strange instinct, Antony knew that he must make no effort to get out by the window; that outside was the creature's own ground; at a disadvantage here, he would be utterly lost if he made any attempt at a fight in the garden. The Thing must be faced here and now. It was coming closer, the fetid smell was overpowering. Helpless, Antony lay splayed against the wall. It could only be a question of minutes, perhaps only a few seconds before he and Sylvia would be engulfed in this ghastly sea of evil that emanated from the foul Horror.

His hand, groping wildly round, touched the poker, but he made no effort to pick it up, knowing that such a weapon would be no good. His eyes roamed, seeking for help. Was

there nothing that could save them? Were they to be possessed forever by the Thing, to fall hopelessly, irredeemably into its clutches?

Sylvia gave a little moan and fainted dead away on his arm, her head rolling to one side. The shaft of moonlight caught a ribbon round her neck. Antony saw it unthinkingly, then with a glimmer of hope. With his free hand he jerked at the ribbon and dragged out the little silver crucifix she always wore.

The time for drastic measures had come; the Horror was only a yard away. Antony felt that he himself could not keep his senses much longer; he dropped his wife on the floor and stood in front of her, the crucifix held at arm's length, his eyes on the horrible black depths where the Thing's eyes should be.

For a long minute he stood there, taut as a bowstring, concentrating all that was left of his strength. And the Thing wavered, swayed backward, then forward, while a sudden gush of noisomeness engulfed Antony. Dimly he realised that this was the crucial moment; that It was making its great effort to crush him. With one last supreme gesture he flung the silver crucifix straight into the middle of the mocking bestial face, crying 'In the name of Christ, be gone!'

There was a sound of rushing wind, a cry so terrible that it rang in his ears for weeks, and the Horror disseminated and disappeared, leaving the room filled with the raw night air from the broken window.

Then Antony fainted also.

The doctor was already in bed and asleep when he was roused by the pounding of his knocker and the pealing of the night bell and, looking out, saw two figures at the door. He hurried down and, to his surprise, Antony and Sylvia tottered into the hall. He dragged the story from them by dint of close questioning.

'What is it, doctor?' pleaded Sylvia. 'Will it come again?'

'I don't know,' he said, 'Honestly I don't know. But I should not stay at "Roman's" if I were you.'

'What was it?' reiterated Antony.

The doctor moved his hands deprecatingly. 'A Roman encampment and settlement,' he said. 'It has been considered

by many experts that the hill is not a natural one but was originally used as a tumulus, perhaps also as a barrow. And it is a well known fact among occultists that such places are favourite haunts of elementals.'

He paused. 'Mrs. Wayre, indeed both of you—have had a fortunate escape. Something unknown to us, some natural cause, perhaps some hidden attraction in one or other of you had let it loose and sent it like the devil its master "seeking whom it may devour". It is only by the grace of God that either of you can tell me the tale.'

THE MAN WHO WAS SAVED

B. W. SLINEY

'ONLY I escaped.' The man whom they had found adrift in the dory hung his head. 'The others—' the listeners bent nearer to catch his throatily whispered words—'the others—it got them—that monstrous, curved thing!' His eyes rolled back, showing bloodshot whites; his body tensed and then he shook, as with the ague. His attempt to say more resulted in stuttering failure.

'He had better be put to bed,' the ship's doctor said. 'His nerves are all gone. Heat and thirst and exposure, of course. Hallucinations. He'll come out of it in time.'

So they put him in the hospital where he raved for three days. And the things he said caused intense interest on board the freighter *Pacific Belle*; and amongst the crew lurking fear whispered that some of the things he said were true.

It was a week before he came into his right mind again, and then the fevers and fears which had beset him passed. He was able to talk to the captain, and to tell a coherent story.

'There were seven of us,' he said with sad recollection, as he glanced at the ship's officers who had gathered about him on the poop deck, 'who set out in a top two-master—the *Scudder*. It belonged to Bob Henry who was our captain. Just a sort of lark, you know—an idle cruise for the joy of the sea and the freedom.

'I was mate, for next to Bob I knew more about handling a ship than the others. And so we sailed along the coast, putting into whatever ports we fancied and living an idle, ideal life. All of us had long been friends.

"Then we rashly decided to make it across the Pacific, depending on a season of few storms to aid us. We were successful. Honolulu was easy; and from there we headed southward, made the Marquesas, and then we sailed from island group to island group — you know them all — until we made the Philippines.

"There we turned homeward, pointing our course for Guam. But midway to Apia our luck failed and we were becalmed for days. We had a small auxiliary motor, which we used for a time to make headway, but it got out of order and we were forced to remain in virtually the same spot for nearly a week. We did not especially mind, for we were in no great hurry, except that it was somewhat monotonous with so very little to do.

"One evening, during our becalmed period, just toward sunset, Hal Rooney pointed out a great disturbance of the water, some little distance from us. It shot up in sprays and eddied out in a most inexplicable manner and then it suddenly ceased. We wondered about it for a long while, but no thinking or imagining or deducing on our part could explain the phenomenon.

"'Possibly,' Bob Henry said, 'it will appear again.'

'And sure enough it did. The next evening at the same hour we again noted that strange disturbance of the water. We knew that it could not possibly be a whale, nor any other large sea-creature of which we had heard, for the tumult was too vast; and the fact that none of us could offer an explanation of the mystery piqued our curiosity.

'The calm continued. The sea floated away from us endlessly, equally on all sides, caught at the edges of the sky, and became one with it. Once in a while a blackfish went blowing by, or an occasional whale. The waters teemed with life. At night the phosphor glow was almost livid, uncannily brilliant. And each evening that same disturbance of the water occurred somewhere in our neighbourhood.

'It was with the third appearance that the thing became too much for us. We determined to put out in a dory and investigate the next time it appeared. It did not disappoint us. Again,

at sunset, while the sky glowed extravagantly, flaunting an enormous batik at the parting day, the water almost dead ahead of our bows broke into a churning fury. We piled into the dory, which was already alongside, and made for it, pulling as hard as we could. But before we were able to reach the spot the maelstrom ceased and we gazed into the intense indigo of unruffled water that was nearly five miles deep.

'Following that attempt, we were more determined than ever to find out the nature of the thing. It was an amazingly large patch of sea that it churned, and though the unbroken immensity of the space we were centre of gave us little for comparison, we judged the area to be approximately that of an acre—an unbelievably large expanse to show such agitation in the midst of so glassily calm a sea.

'The next afternoon, just as the sun fell into the sea, splashing all our horizons with a myriad tints, a huge whale went lolling by, sounding and coming up with great jets of water cascading over it. I watched with the glasses, as it drove powerfully through the water, peacefully taking its time. Suddenly, however, it changed. It displayed signs of confusion, of alarm. First it turned one way, then another, cutting about sharply—and then I very distinctly heard it give a groan of anguish. It was a heart-breaking sound—the cry of a great helpless animal in mortal distress. Immediately afterward the water surrounding it broke into its daily wild disorder, and the leviathan seemed gripped by a force it could not escape. It struggled violently, throwing its huge bulk about with futile effort. Greater and greater the melée became, and then, suddenly, the whale was still.

'We looked at one another, fright in our eyes. It was tremendously awful. And then, as we looked again out there, the whale lost all shape and the water became red with gore and blood as it was crushed to a pulp. In but a few minutes it was gone, utterly vanished from view—even the bloodiness of the water cleared—the whirling and splashing ceased, and the sun went down on a still sea. All of us were speechless. It was the most dreadful thing any of us had ever seen.'

The speaker paused in his narrative, shaken by the memory

of what he had related. The captain and his officers looked at one another with veiled scepticism. The doctor raised an eye-brow. There seemed no doubt of it; the man was insane.

Presently he went on with his wildly impossible yarn. His listeners were attentive, but secretly unbelieving. In time, it was hoped he might regain his mental balance. In the meanwhile——

'To say that we were shaken would not be half expressing our state of mind. It was so inexplicable, so wildly preposterous! I was for getting away as soon as possible, and so were several of the others. But the rest were keen to learn what the thing was. And, to settle any argument, the calm held unbroken and the motor continued in disrepair, despite our efforts over it.

'For three days, then, the thing did not come to the surface. We had decided that it was some sort of deep-sea creature, some gargantuan monster, that came out of the vast depths of the ocean to feed. But we had never heard of such a thing; save in stories of early navigators' superstitions. We hesitated to believe the thing we had seen—we were afraid to believe it.

'It was now that fear came to us. Hitherto we had been curious, idly speculative, and inclined to laugh. Now our thoughts were interrupted by premonitions of disaster. Flying fish, as they flashed from the surface and splashed into the water about us, startled; and porpoises blundering into our vicinity—brought us all on deck. At night, a lost puff of breeze, slatting the rigging against the sails, startled us into alarmed awakening. And though the same subject—possible danger from the unknown out of the deep—occupied the mind of each of us, it was never spoken of. But there was in the air a chilling presence of dread.

'I believe we would have left that place had we been able. For the memory of the fate of the whale was ever vivid in our minds. Following the death of the whale, however, the monster did not rise for three days, as I have said. This gave us some sense of relief, but it was on the third day that the great tragedy occurred.

'I was occupied with fitting a new seat to the dory which was swung up on deck and the others were idling, making bets

as to the quarter in which the creature would next appear, or if we should see it again.

'I was startled by a scream from one of the men, and immediately after followed the sound of churning water—a sound which sent the very essence of dread all through me and cowed my soul. Somehow I knew we were in the midst of the monster's rise to the surface. I stood and looked over the side. There was a horrible mass of pulsating green matter—a revolting substance that had no definite form, and yet was solid—a writhing, heaving island of the stuff.

'Even as I looked, it surged up from the water and rolled over the side of the schooner, turning over on itself, slithering and cascading on the deck. Every one of us was frantic. Some rushed for the after cabin, but they were cut off by a slimy arm that slid across their path. It spread and lifted with terrorising rapidity. Two of the men tried to climb a mast; Bob Henry raced towards the bow and fell. An instant later he was covered with the gruesome matter, even before he had a chance to cry out, and was hidden from sight. Hardly knowing what I did, I turned the dory over on myself, dragging Mark Whittmore, the nearest man to me, under with me. Fortunately I had removed all the seats and there was just room for the two of us as we lay prone.

'Then came darkness, and an inconceivably foul odour of decay as the monster mass pushed itself over the dory—a suffocating, interminable darkness, while we were cramped under that flat-bottomed boat, scarcely daring to think, even, of the horror that crawled over us. When we thought our lungs would burst for want of fresh air, light came under the dory once more and gradually the slithering, swishing, churning of that thing which had boarded us ceased. For a long while, however, we were too frightened to move, but finally our concern for our companions' fate compelled us to lift the dory.

'The sky glowed with the last rays of the setting sun, and the sea slept beneath it, undisturbed. But the decks of the *Scudder* were wet with a yellow-green, malodorous slime and silence hung like a pall over the ship.

'We called. There was no answer—not even the mockery of

an echo. With consternation seizing us we rushed into the afterhouse, but it was without a person in it. In a panic, we ran to the forecastle, and it too was suggestively deserted. And nowhere on that ship did we find a soul. Every man, except ourselves, had disappeared. That thing——' his voice broke and again into his face came that haunting pain—"that thing had got them all.'

For a while he paused, making strong effort to overcome his rising emotions, and the fear that memory brought him. The listeners looked away and were silent; and presently they heard his voice, firmly continuing the tale.

'You cannot conceive of the terror which descended on us after that frightful discovery. Aimlessly, dazedly, we searched the vessel through and through, but we were the only men aboard the *Scudder*. It was a fact that we had to face, but could not bring ourselves to believe.

'Night came quickly, and the moon and stars stared coldly down on us. We decided at length to remain on the ship would be suicidal, for the calm still hung over the water like a dead thing, and the thought of that unspeakable thing that lived somewhere beneath us was appalling. So we fitted the dory with water and food, and rowed away in the night from that ill-fated ship.

'Then there came interminable days of torture under a malignant sun, and nights of terror of what might lurk in the waters around us. And one morning I woke to find myself alone in the dory. The day before Mark had talked of insanity; and I believe that he could not face the possibility.

'Now I attained the utmost in despair. I was, I believe, too shocked to think clearly, or I, too, might have gone over the side. From the morning of that discovery until you picked me up, I was in a coma. Of the passage of time, I do not recall.

'And such is my story, gentlemen. You may find it hard to believe. I find it difficult myself, and wonder sometimes if it is not an insane conception of diseased imagination. I wish it were. But I am tormented with the reality.'

The *Pacific Belle* held her westward course for Manila. The story of the man who had been saved spread among the crew,

where it was hotly debated and quite generally accepted. The officers of the ship, however, avoided the subject and particularly before the stranger it was never mentioned.

But one morning, just at dawn, a derelict schooner was sighted. The captain, awakened, ordered the *Pacific Belle* hove to while investigation was made. With closer inspection and increasing light, it was made out to be the *Scudder* of San Francisco. The man who had been saved was called.

‘Yes!’ he cried. ‘Yes! That’s the boat—our schooner . . . But—’

He dropped, swayed. The mate caught him and called one of the crew.

‘Take him to his cabin,’ he said, ‘and keep him there.’

Investigation corroborated the statements the stranger had made. Furthermore, the *Scudder’s* papers proved beyond doubt that the man they had aboard came from her. And since there was nothing to indicate that anything else could have possibly driven the men from the ship, their passenger’s strange story assumed a verity that even the officers reluctantly admitted.

A short consultation decided the fate of the *Scudder*. Left as she was, derelict, she would have become a serious menace to shipping and possible salvage value did not warrant the long tow into port. Dynamite was placed amidships and set off.

With a splintering crash the *Scudder* heaved upward and outward, and plunged into the deeps of the ocean. The *Pacific Belle* continued on her way.

Later in the day, the captain studied his charts. ‘Do you think,’ he asked the mate at length, ‘that there is really anything in the fellow’s story?’

The mate shrugged. ‘Such things,’ he answered readily, ‘don’t happen. He’s off, that’s all. All the men were gone from the *Scudder*, yes, but I’d hate to accept such an explanation for it.’

‘The water in this part of the ocean, mister,’ the captain slowly said, ‘is five miles deep—as deep as the tallest mountain is high. It’s barely possible that there’s a lot of things out here that we don’t know of—or even remotely suspect.’ However—that night, the swollen moon down and all asleep save the

watches and the man who had come aboard from out of the ocean, the *Pacific Belle* plunged into stark, brief terror.

The stranger, affected by again seeing the *Scudder*, had been unable to sleep. After hours of restlessness, he had gone to the bows, where he stared dully across the water. As he stood there, slowly, almost imperceptibly, he felt himself to be afraid.

An odour had come to him, an odour which brought to his mind the horror of his last day aboard the *Scudder*—the sickening decay-laden odour of the monster from the deep. Then he listened with super-intent ears, and above the vessel's vibration he caught the sound of churning, whirling water. He screamed with a loudness that awoke everyone on the *Pacific Belle* as he recognised these things—a scream that brought everyone to his feet, anticipating calamity.

He turned from the prow and ran in stumbling haste across the deck and up the ladder to the bridge. The mate was there, alarmed at the cry of horror.

'Mister!' he gasped his mouth dry with panic, 'Mister! The thing—the monster! Stop the ship. Reverse her, for God's sake!'

The mate laughed with relief as he recognised the man. He had been in dread of something terrible, and it was only another fit.

'Come now, old boy,' he said in effort to comfort. 'Better quiet down a bit, don't—'

With another terrible scream the fellow was gone from the bridge, jerking a preserver from the rail, he leaped free of the *Pacific Belle*.

'Man overboard!' the mate had seen him disappear and gave the alarm as he ran to the bridge controls. But before he reached them the speed of the *Pacific Belle* slackened abruptly, as though it had fouled the meshes of a gigantic net; and then it lost headway altogether. A bright eerie glow of phosphorescent green lighted the water in a vast area, suddenly bursting into a lurid brilliance which caught the vessel out of the night and revealed its helplessness to the stars.

The glowing green mass surged sweepingly toward the vessel, piled against it, rolled over it, clinging to its sides, flooding its decks. Men who had come out to investigate the shouting and

confusion frantically rushed below deck, barricading ports and doors behind them. On his bridge the captain sent useless messages to the engine-room. The ship could not move.

Then, slowly, inexorably, as the brilliance of the phosphorescent light lessened, the great mass which was its source began to sink. Gradually it settled, carrying the *Pacific Belle*, fair sized steamer though she was, down with it. The waves closed over the ship's main deck, touched and submerged the bridge, poured down the funnels, sending clouds of steam hissing into the air, and finally even the tops of the masts disappeared. There had been no time for a wireless message, but a message would have been futile.

Again the waters calmed, but after half an hour they were torn for a few minutes by a great rush of bubbles to the top. Following the caving in from depth pressure of the *Pacific Belle's* bulkheads. But after that the surface was never more disturbed by the *Pacific Belle*.

Microcosmic in a terrifying vastness of water, a man floated on a preserver in the path of a liner that later picked him up. And as he slowly realised the irony of his second escape, he sobbed with futile pity for himself.

DORNER CORDAIANTHUS

HESTER HOLLAND

FROM the time of his leaving college when I first met Dorner, his whole life was given up to research work.

He was an ardent palaeobotanist and his passion for delving into the history of bygone plants was as keen as that of an archaeologist among mummies. Like them, he was prepared to go through any dangers for the sake of new discoveries, and I received letters from all parts of the world where he was digging among the rocks in the hope of finding fossils of unknown prehistoric plants.

His house in Surrey, where he lived with his old servant, contained the cabinets where he kept the magnificent collection of curiosities and relics of ever-growing interest. Apart from these botanical treasures the rooms were a museum for rare shells, weird insects, precious stones, idols and whatnots. I would spend happy weekends browsing among these curios, and I'm afraid I envied him the job, which seemed infinitely better than my stockbroking one.

However, at forty Dorner had still not attained his ambition. When I could get down from town for the evening, we would potter round his charming garden and discuss his pet scientific points.

'I am positive,' he would say, 'that some day they will discover a fossilised seed in which a fertile embryo will be found. Then we will really be able to know what a prehistoric plant was like.'

We argued this point so often, I used to tease him.

'How can you expect a seed that has been embedded for

millions of years to sprout? You might as well hope to find a sleeping Dinosaur. Besides, seeds germinate upon the ground, not on the plant, and in that time of great heat they germinated at once.'

He would put forth the instance of the toad that had been imprisoned in a stone for centuries and was still alive.

'A reptile,' I said. 'We are talking of vegetables.'

Dorner had a theory that the missing link between human beings and the rest of the living world would eventually be established through plants. He argued that the functions of plants are identical with those of men.

'They have never gone on their bellies like animals, I believe there is a direct connection between them and us.'

'Well, how did we manage about our roots?' I would put in.

'It is hardly necessary for some plants to have roots. They exist chiefly by air taken in by their leaves.'

Sitting in his garden one evening on the day before his departure on a long tour of research, he broke silence by saying, 'You know, I think the legend of the mandrake must have some truth in it.'

'The Mandrake was supposed to squeak, wasn't it?' I asked.

'It screamed when it was uprooted and the roots had a human shape. Don't you see a connection with Dante's story of the free people in Hell and the Maya symbol of a branching body?'

'I can't quite see what you are driving at. Those were allegories.'

'There is truth at the bottom of all allegories and legends. The fact has been proved time and again. Why, there are meat-eating plants now, plants that move, that have digestive powers as we have.'

'Well?' I asked.

'Millions of years ago, in some great geological upheaval there may have been destroyed a plant which had become free of the soil. Which lived by oxygen as we do.'

'A kind of emancipated cabbage?' I suggested.

It was impossible not to poke fun at Dorner. He was like a

child when he got on to his pet theory but he took my chaff in good part.

Next day I saw him off on his expedition to India, where he was to lead a research party to the lesser known portions of Gondwana Land. This region they knew to be rich in species of permo-carboniferous flora. Dorner looked like a plant himself as he stood on the deck, waving good-bye. His thin little body was rigid, whilst his arms brandished a walking-stick and two green-topped butterfly nets. After a few months I began to have letters from him. They had found some excellent specimens of *Glossopteris* flora, relics of some hitherto unknown plants. They had had exciting adventures with snakes, and so on.

After that I heard no more until one morning I received a telegram from a remote station in India. It was like Dorner to wire. In his excitement he couldn't wait for the post to impart his news. What he had to say thrilled me, though I was not so keen on Palæobotany as my friend.

'Returning at once. Discovered apparently fertile seed.
Sail Sinai June 26th. Dorner.'

I realised the importance of this discovery. None of these embedded seeds had so far shown any powers of germination. If this seed should quicken it would mean the re-creation of a plant which had its being in those past ages that we can only guess at.

I met Dorner on his arrival in England and we went back to his house. He seemed smaller and thinner than ever, but wild with excitement and enthusiasm. We sat up late in his little sitting-room, while he described his adventures and exhibited his trophies. The wonderful seed was displayed with the reverent pride of a young mother displaying her first-born. It had been discovered among several other fossilized seeds in the Talchin boulder beds. Why it had not germinated was a mystery, but it was still fertile, and Dorner had decided to plant it under the conditions he thought would be most natural to it. In appearance it had the fleshy consistency of a nasturtium seed, with the same crinkled skin. But whereas that is generally

green or brown, this was a sickly yellow. But one should be lenient with a complexion when it is a few million years old. What I could not forgive was the seed's strong resemblance to a dried maggot. I pointed this out to Dorner, hiding my repugnance as best I could.

'You don't think you have got hold of a fossilized grub by mistake?' I asked facetiously.

He was hovering tenderly over the curled, blackheaded little body lying in its bed of cotton wool, and answered with great lack of humour. 'Don't be an ass. This may prove my theory. I wonder what sort of temperature a specimen of this sort would require.'

For the next few weeks I believe his spirit lived in the Palæozoic Age while he tried to emulate its climate with what scientific aids he possessed. During this time he was very mysterious about the seed and allowed no one near the greenhouse where it had been planted. However, I turned up one evening at his house, and he took me down the garden with Tim, his fox terrier, dancing at our heels. The little dog was no more excited than his master. Dorner was positively trembling. The only words he said were 'It's sprouted. Come and see!'

The conservatory was stacked with electric heaters, artificial light and, in fact, every appliance he could think of to give the plant a better chance. He would not allow Timmy in. He might get entangled among the wires and things. We both adored Timmy. Leaving him to bark dolefully outside, we advanced into the holy of holies.

I found Dorner had arranged a kind of barricade among the seed beds. Evidently winds were not allowed to blow upon it or the sun to beat too fiercely. It might have been an Emperor's couch which we approached; but though I smiled to myself I could not but feel awe-stricken. Here was the descendant of plants which had flourished when our world of man was not thought of. When enormous and grotesque reptiles walked the oozy earth and fought with each other for mastery. And now nothing remained of them but a few hoarded bones. Dorner switched off an electric battery which was doing its best to

persuade the Embryo that it was back in the Dark Ages, and presented to me a large pot full of earth.

'I noticed it this morning,' he said in a whisper.

Bending cautiously over the earth, I saw a small white object protruding above the surface.

'Oh, is that the seed?' I asked.

He nodded. 'I've been to endless trouble getting the right chemicals for the soil. I wrote to Edgar for particulars. He is an expert on what soil was made of at that time. Judging by the result, I must have got the right ingredients.'

I looked more closely at the tiny plant, and as I gazed it seemed to writhe upwards like a worm does as it presses its way through the ground. I felt suddenly sick.

'It's moving!' I said.

'Yes,' gasped my friend. 'That's the most marvellous thing about it. It shows my theory was true. It moves of its own accord.'

We went out of the stifling greenhouse to meet the joyous bounding Timmy. After that there was no doubt about the seed having germinated. To give it more freedom—there were no pots in the Palaeozoic Age—Dorner moved it into a specially prepared bed in the greenhouse. When it was large enough to receive visitors, scientists called upon it. Reporters waited for interviews. It was photographed. Botanical papers wrote long articles about it. It was christened Dorner *Cordaianthus* as palaeobotanists earnestly agreed it belonged to that family. Dorner himself considered it more of a Cycadean type, but subsequent events proved him wrong. I was much too ill-versed in the technical knowledge of these things to argue the point, but I was very proud of being one of the first to see it in its infancy.

It certainly grew at a tremendous pace. This may have been due to the artificial aids received. A fortnight after my first visit I inspected the plant again, and was astonished at its rapid development. The *Cordaianthus* now had the appearance of a tree and was nearly two feet high. Branch-like shoots protruded from the upper part of its stem or trunk, which measured about two inches in circumference. White in colour, it was lined all over by a network of brownish veins that

evidently formed some part of a system of circulation. The whole growth was covered with fine hairs as one sees on a poppy stalk. These hairs became sharp hard points or thorns when approaching the ends of the shoots. The shoots did not develop from the ends like ordinary plants. There were no budding leaves or flowers. They were in the nature of suckers, each having a worm-like heart surrounded by the thorns, while the branch body grew from the parent stem, becoming broader and longer, but never losing its original shape. These sucker-like heads expanded or contracted as the plant swayed. For it swayed like seaweed in a swell. But there was no current to sway it. As if in some unfelt wind it writhed up and down with a horrible rhythm of its own. The word growth adequately expressed the impression the plant gave me. It had the decayed appearance of a fungus, rather than the freshness of a shrub. Also, there was none of that roughness of texture one sees on the bark of shrubs. The main stem from which the branches grew was smooth as they were. The joint was invisible like the arms of a body. That was what it reminded me of. But not of a human body. More like an attenuated octopus, with its sucker-like tendrils growing out and lengthening as the thing got bigger. And it always kept up that slow, horrible swaying movement. The thing was alive like an octopus.

I turned to Dorner, who was watching it with adoring eyes.

'Have you ever tried to kill it?' I asked.

'Kill it?' he exclaimed in horror.

'Yes. Have you ever tried to find out whether it will die like an animal, I mean? Some plants are harder to kill than animals.'

'For instance?'

'Well, the ordinary convolvulus is pretty hard to eradicate from a garden. At least I find it so. Chop it off at one end, it will come up in bunches somewhere else. It has wormlike roots, rather like this!'

'Fancy comparing a common thing like that with Cordaianthus,' exclaimed Dorner.

'It grows nearly as quickly as this,' I answered. 'I could swear it has done some growing while we were here.'

He swelled with pride. 'Isn't it marvellous? And we are practically the first who have ever seen it.'

It certainly was wonderful, but I thought as I watched those undulating suckers moving in this blind rhythmic way that before the climate in that long past time got too hot or too cold for it, the *Cordaianthus* could not have been nearly so decorative as our simple little *convolvulus*.

Dorner stepped forwards and touched one of the tendrils. Instantly, as though an electric message had passed through the whole body, all the suckers turned to the one his hand rested on.

'Take care!' I cried.

A thorn had pricked him. There was a drop of blood on the whitish surface of the plant. Dorner took out his hand-kerchief to wipe the stain away but I stopped him, saying, 'Leave it there. It will be gone tomorrow!'

'But why should it go—and it looks beastly!'

I pointed to the sawing heads which were bunching together round the red splodge. 'They will suck it up. It's blood they want.'

Dorner stared at me. 'You mean it's insectivorous, but it's quite a different sort of plant.'

'I think it's carnivorous.' I answered. 'You'll have to give it something to eat. Those worm things want something more than carbon dioxide.'

Just outside the greenhouse door, on our way in to tea, was a small white object pressing its way through the turf.

I showed it to Dorner. 'You needn't have worried about all those electric contrivances. Our *Cordaianthus* seems to be making itself very much at home.'

My friend was on his knees examining the tiny shoot.

'It must have sunk its roots right under the greenhouse,' he said in an awed voice.

I laughed. 'The climate of England seems to agree with it. You'll be having it popping through the drawing-room carpet next. I believe it gnaws its way up.'

'Rot!' said Dorner. 'It's funny it hasn't any leaves, though, perhaps there will be some kind of bloom. Well, let's hope it

will be a nice looking one whenever it thinks fit to come out.'

We went in to tea.

I was right about the plant's growth. In a week or so Dorner's lawn was punctuated with its writhing tendrils. Evidently it grew faster under ground than in the air. Dorner was obliged to destroy some of them. He even dug down and cut the roots away, but this was as useless as destroying a *convolvulus*. He said it was like cutting worms in half and made him sick. Then the neighbours who at first were anxious to have cuttings from the new plant began to complain. The *Cordaianthus* was sprouting all over their gardens.

'And I don't like the look of it,' said the vicar's wife. 'I've never seen a tree that moves without anything to move it. Please take it away, Mr. Dorner. It's coming up all among my vegetables.'

There began a regular campaign against the *Cordaianthus* in Dorner's garden as well as others. His lawn presented a mass of sprouting worms, to which weed-killer and the spade were vigorously applied. He was content to keep one specimen, which grew outside the greenhouse. The one inside had died of a mysterious disease. We were at a loss to know what had killed it. Dorner thought the heat had been too great, but I harboured the view it had starved to death. We watched the emaciated body quiver in a last agony like an animal.

'It wants meat,' I said, nauseated by the sight.

Dorner would not believe it was carnivorous. 'How could it get meat in the Palæozoic Age?' he argued. 'I'm giving it a special sort of water with chemicals in it which Edgar sent me.'

Suffice it to say, the thing died.

One evening we were sitting in the garden discussing the surviving plant. There had been a stream of complaints that morning from the houses round about. People could not eradicate the roots from their land.

'The cartloads of weed-killer they must have bought would sink a ship,' said Dorner, sighing. 'I believe they are afraid of the thing.'

'Afraid or not,' I answered. 'It's not jolly to have it hanging about in flower beds.'

My friend stroked Timmy's soft coat tenderly. 'I think there will be a flower soon, now its got into the right environment. The greenhouse was evidently too hot. As we know it must have existed in the Permo-carboniferous strata when things were getting a bit cooler owing to glaciers. The reason for this seed having been fertile but never germinating was a sudden catastrophe of some kind—flood, earthquake or landslide, which submerged it.'

'It certainly possesses the vitality which would account for its tenacity to life,' I commented.

Dorner seemed to have dropped his theory of plant and human connection. Once or twice I caught him looking at the tree with aversion in his eyes. It stood now about four feet high, and in the full light of the afternoon sun presented a particularly white and uncanny appearance. The crowd of suckers which formed its branches curled and uncurled gently in the summer air. A vigorous extermination of all subsidiary shoots had left it for the moment the sole survivor on our lawn.

'I suppose it will die in the winter,' said Dorner presently.

'I hope so,' I answered. The remark did not cause the flare of temper I expected.

'I don't believe I should care,' he said, with the naïveté of a child. 'Not since this morning.'

'What happened this morning?'

'I went up close to have a look at it and one of the suckers twisted round my arm. It took quite a time to get it off. It showed extraordinary strength.'

I stopped to pat Timmy, who lay by our feet. 'Why don't you cut it down?'

Dorner looked apologetic. 'It's such an extraordinary thing; seems a pity to destroy it, but if it dies a natural death, I shan't mind. I suppose it would have to be killed sometime simply because it shows a propensity to live. I expect in the Dark Ages, or whenever the thing existed, there was plenty of room to spread. No back gardens there.' Dorner smiled. 'How keen Rayland would have been to see it. He reconstructed the *Cordaianthus*, you know, although I have never agreed this had the slightest resemblance to that family.'

As Dorner spoke, a bird fluttered on to one of the slowly moving branches. With the swiftness of a snake the bough it rested on lapped round the struggling body and crushed it to death. I sprang to my feet. If a hatchet had been in my hand instead of a stick, the tree would have been hacked to pieces. I struck it furiously again and again.

Dorner came to the rescue. 'It's no use doing that. The bird's dead. There will be another cause for complaint among the neighbours if it starts eating the livestock. Evidently that's what it has been needing.'

I saw the scientist was transcendent in him, or I would have pleaded for the venomous thing to be destroyed. Dorner however was obsessed by the idea of seeing a possible flower, and would not give up that hope without a struggle.

Business kept me in town a good deal and I did not see much of him. He wrote that he was in trouble again with the neighbours. They threatened to take action against him for still keeping the plant. Then I had a heartbroken letter saying that poor little Timmy was dead. He had been found curled up in the tree with the suckers massed about his body like a swarm of bees.

'I killed the *Cordaianthus*,' wrote Dorner. 'Dug it up and burnt it. People can't grumble any more, but it wasn't for their silly sakes I killed the thing. I was so mad with rage about Timmy. It might have spared him. I used to give it hunks of meat, too.'

Poor Dorner. But one might as well bring an *Ichthyosaurus* into our civilised world and keep it as a pet. I hoped he would plan another expedition soon and forget his disappointment.

I was away in Paris for a month and when I came back I rang him up. As a rule he came to the telephone himself and I was surprised when his old servant answered.

'The professor is not here, sir. We have been trying to find you to ask you if you knew where he had gone.'

'When did he go?' I asked.

'He's been away three days, sir. I don't know what to do. He's not left any address.'

Evidently the responsibility of his vanished master was

proving too great and the man was anxious I should come down.

I did not feel anxious as I knew Dorner was upset about his plant and had probably gone off for a change, not wishing to be bothered with letters. However, things began to look serious when I found that no luggage had been taken, and my friend had not said anything about going away. I rang up the police. Why his man had not done so before was a mystery to me, but I suppose he did not wish to do so for fear of annoying Dorner. He had just gone on from day to day, hoping his master would turn up.

The police arrived and questioned old Standish as to when he had last seen his master. It was after tea three days ago. He had seen Dorner go down the garden smoking a pipe.

'Did the gentleman say anything to you before he went out?'

'Yes, sir. He said he was going out to get some weed-killer.'

'Why did he want weed-killer?'

'I don't know what he wanted it for specially, sir; he used it a good deal lately.'

'What on?'

'For that queer plant of his, sir. It kept coming up in odd places.'

'I see. And where did he keep the weed-killer?'

'In the greenhouse at the bottom of the garden.'

'And are you sure Mr. Dorner didn't come back to the house again?'

'I couldn't be sure of that, sir, because I went back to the scullery after I saw him leave the house.'

'Could you see the garden from the scullery?'

'No, sir; it's at the back.'

'And when did you begin to be disturbed at your master's absence?'

'I had supper ready for him, sir, and rang the bell, but he never came in.'

'Was he generally punctual for meals?'

'Not as a rule, sir. I've known him stay out till twelve or one o'clock in the morning. That's why I didn't worry as much as I might have done.'

'But in the morning when he was not in his room, what did you think then?'

'I didn't know what I ought to do, sir. I didn't like to ring up Scotland Yard in case he'd come in and find the place full of policemen.'

The sergeant bore this well, 'But you should have got into communication with us before this, you know. I suppose you searched the house?'

The old man had looked everywhere. The greenhouse and surrounding shrubberies were examined and the local ponds were dragged. The excitement became intense. People forgot their quarrel about *Cordaianthus* and became full of solicitude.

'Such a charming man! I do hope nothing has happened. He was so eccentric, wasn't he?'

For myself, I wished I had not left Dorner at a time when he needed a friend. I was afraid his disappointment about his plant must have affected his brain. All the same, there seemed no particular reason why he should have been so upset. I noticed several little white shoots coming up on the lawn, which showed the *Cordaianthus* was still throwing out hostages to fortune. But from where? Leaving the inspector and his men to ferret among the bushes in their search for footprints and so on, I retraced my steps to the house. A member of the Force was at the front door talking with Standish.

'And the cellars?' I heard him say. 'Did you go through them?'

There was only the wine cellar and the coal hole, but I remembered another room which Dorner always kept locked, and which the old man with his limited intelligence would not have thought of looking in. This cellar room was very dark and was used for storing certain specimens Dorner brought home which required a damp atmosphere. I did not remember it having been opened lately and suddenly understood what had been in my friend's mind when he got the weed-killer. I beckoned to the sergeant and he followed me down the cellar steps.

'I don't think Standish will have searched this part of the

house,' I explained. 'Mr. Dorner generally kept this room locked. Hallo! The door's half open!'

We had come to the door and I tried to push through. It resisted me strangely, as if some soft pliant body leant against it on the inside. Then, as I persisted, the door gave way and we saw a crowd of white, slowly-moving arms stretching out towards the light. A spectral tree was growing from the damp earth floor of the cellar, its trunk long and attenuated, with branches which stretched up till they crushed against the low ceiling. In the midst of them, and close in their white embrace, was the body of Dorner. It was wrapped and locked in a mass of suckers. He must have come down here to find out where the roots came from and touched one of the starved things by mistake. It had wound about his throat, a rooted octopus. I and the sergeant hacked it to pieces, but Dorner was dead. On some of the hairy tendrils something had grown. It was a kind of scarlet fungus, blotching over the sickly branches. The Cordaianthus had flowered at last—whether before or after Dorner's death no one could tell. I will not describe the condition he was in. The plant *was* carnivorous and it had taken what it could get.

ROGUES IN THE HOUSE

ROBERT E. HOWARD

At a Court festival, Nabonidus, the Red Priest, who was the real ruler of the city, touched Murilo, the young aristocrat, courteously on the arm. Murilo turned to meet the priest's enigmatic gaze, and to wonder at the hidden meaning therein. No words passed between them, but Nabonidus bowed and handed Murilo a small gold cask. The young nobleman, knowing that Nabonidus did nothing without reason, excused himself at the first opportunity and returned hastily to his chamber. There he opened the cask and found within it a human ear, which he recognised by a peculiar scar upon it. He broke into a profuse sweat and was no longer in doubt about the meaning of the Red Priest's glance.

But Murilo, for all his scented black curls and foppish apparel, was no weakling to bend his neck to the knife without a struggle. He did not know whether Nabonidus was merely playing with him or giving him a chance to go into voluntary exile, but the fact that he was still alive and at liberty proved that he was to be given at least a few hours, probably for meditation. But he needed no meditation for decision; what he needed was a tool. And Fate furnished that tool, working among the dives and brothels of the squalid quarters even while the young nobleman shivered and pondered in the part of the city occupied by the purple-towered marble and ivory palaces of the aristocracy.

There was a priest of Anu whose temple, rising at the fringe of the slums district, was the scene of more than devotions. The priest was fat and full fed, and he was at once a fence for stolen

articles and a spy for the police. He worked a thriving trade both ways, because the district on which he bordered was the Maze, a tangle of muddy winding alleys and sordid dens frequented by the boldest thieves in the kingdom. Daring above all were a Gunderman deserter from the mercenaries and a barbaric Cimmerian. Because of the priest of Anu, the Gunderman was taken and hanged in the market-square. But the Cimmerian fled, and learning in devious ways of the priest's treachery, he entered the temple of Anu by night and cut off the priest's head. There followed a great turmoil in the city, but search for the killer proved fruitless until his mistress betrayed him to the authorities, and led a captain of the guard and his squad to the hidden chamber where the barbarian lay drunk.

Waking to stupefied but ferocious life when they seized him, he disembowelled the captain, burst through his assailants and would have escaped, but for the liquor that still clouded his senses. Bewildered and half-blinded, he missed the open door in his headlong flight and dashed his head against the stone wall so terrifically that he knocked himself senseless. When he came to he was in the strongest dungeon in the city, shackled to the wall with chains not even his barbaric thews could break.

To this cell came Murilo, masked and wrapped in a wide black cloak. The Cimmerian surveyed him with interest, thinking him the executioner sent to dispatch him. Murilo set him at ease and regarded him with no less interest. Even in the dim light of the dungeon, with his limbs loaded with chains, the primitive power of the man was evident. His mighty body and thick-muscled limbs combined the strength of a grizzly bear with the quickness of a panther. Under his tangled black mane his blue eyes blazed with unquenchable savagery.

'Would you like to live?' asked Murilo. The barbarian grunted, new interest in his eyes.

'If I arrange for your escape will you do a favour for me?' the aristocrat asked.

The Cimmerian did not speak but the intensity of his gaze answered for him.

'I want you to kill a man for me.'

'Whom?'

Murilo's voice sank to a whisper. 'Nabonidus, the king's priest.'

The Cimmerian showed no sign of surprise or perturbation. He had none of the fear or reverence for authority that civilisation instils into men. King or beggar, it was all one to him. Nor did he ask why Murilo had come to him when the quarters were full of cut-throats outside prisons.

'When am I to escape?' he demanded.

'Within the hour. There is but one guard in this part of the dungeon at night. He can be bribed; he *has* been bribed. See, here are the keys to your chains. I'll remove them and after I have been gone an hour the guard, Athicus, will unlock the door to your cell. You will bind him with strips torn from your tunic; so when he is found the authorities will think that you were rescued from the outside and will not suspect him. Go at once to the house of the Red Priest and kill him. Then go to the Rats' Den where a man will meet you and give you a pouch of gold and a horse. With those you can escape from the city and flee the country.'

'Take off these cursed chains now,' commanded the Cimmerian. 'And have the guards bring me food. By Crom, I have lived on mouldy bread and water for a whole day and I am nigh to famishing.'

'It shall be done. But remember—you are not to escape until I have had time to reach my house.'

Freed of his chains, the barbarian stood up and stretched his heavy arms, enormous in the gloom of the dungeon. Murilo again felt that if any man in the world could accomplish the task he had set, this Cimmerian could. With a few repeated instructions he left the prison, first directing Athicus to take a platter of beef and ale to the prisoner. He knew he could trust the guard, not only because of the money he had paid, but because of certain information he possessed regarding the man.

When he returned to his chamber, Murilo was in full control of his fears. Nabonidus would strike through the King—of that he was certain. And since the Royal guardsmen were not knocking at his door, it was as certain that the priest had said nothing

to the King, so far. Tomorrow he would speak beyond a doubt—if he lived to see tomorrow.

Murilo believed the Cimmerian would keep faith with him. Whether the man would be able to carry out his purpose remained to be seen. Men had attempted to assassinate the Red Priest before, and they had died in hideous and nameless ways. But they had been products of the cities of men, lacking the wolfish instincts of the barbarian. The instant that Murilo, turning the gold cask with its severed ear in his hands, had learned through his secret channels that the Cimmerian had been captured he had seen a solution to his problem.

In his chamber again, he drank a toast to the man, whose name was Conan, and to his success that night. And while he was drinking, one of his spies brought him the news that Athicus had been arrested and thrown into prison. The Cimmerian had not escaped.

Murilo felt his blood turn to ice again. He could see in this twist of fate only the sinister hand of Nabonidus, and an eerie obsession began to grow on him that the Red Priest was more than human—a sorcerer who read the minds of his victims and pulled strings on which they danced like puppets. With despair came desperation. Girding a sword beneath his black cloak, he left his house by a hidden way and hurried through the deserted streets. It was just on midnight when he came to the house of Nabonidus, looming blackly among the walled gardens that separated it from the surrounding estates.

The wall was high but not impossible to negotiate. Nabonidus did not put his trust in mere barriers of stone. It was what was inside the wall that was to be feared. What these things were, Murilo did not know precisely. He knew there was at least a huge savage dog that roamed the gardens and had on occasion torn an intruder to pieces as a hound rends a rabbit. What else there might be he did not care to conjecture. Men who had been allowed to enter the house on brief legitimate business reported that Nabonidus dwelt among rich furnishings, yet simply attended by a surprisingly small number of servants. Indeed, they mentioned only one as having been visible—a tall, silent man called Joka. Someone else, presumably a slave, had

been heard moving about in the recesses of the house, but this person no one had ever seen. The greatest mystery of that mysterious house was Nabonidus himself, whose power of intrigue and grasp of international politics had made him the strongest man in the kingdom. People, Chancellor and King, moved puppet-like to the strings he worked.

Murilo scaled the wall and dropped down into the gardens, which were expanses of shadow darkened by clumps of shrubbery and waving foliage. No light shone in the windows of the house which loomed so blackly among the trees. The young nobleman stole stealthily yet swiftly among the shrubs. Momentarily he expected to hear the baying of the great dog, and to see its giant body hurtle through the shadows. He doubted the effectiveness of his sword against such an attack, but he did not hesitate. As well die beneath the fangs of a beast as the axe of the headman.

He stumbled over something bulky and yielding. Bending close in the dim starlight he made out a limp shape on the ground. It was the dog that guarded the gardens, and it was dead. Its neck was broken and it bore what seemed to be the mark of great fangs. Murilo felt that no human being had done this. The beast had met with a monster more savage than itself. Murilo glared nervously at the cryptic masses of bush and shrub; then, with a shrug of his shoulders, he approached the silent house.

The first door he tried proved to be unlocked. He entered warily, sword in hand, and found himself in a long, shadowy hallway dimly illumined by a light that gleamed through the hangings at the other end. Complete silence hung over the whole house. Murilo glided along the hall and halted to peer through the hangings. He looked into a lighted room, over the windows of which velvet curtains were drawn so closely as to allow no beam to shine through. The room was empty, in so far as human life was concerned, but it had a grisly occupant, nevertheless. In the midst of a wreckage of furniture and torn hangings that told of a fearful struggle, lay the body of a man. The form lay on its belly, but the head was twisted about so that

the chin rested behind a shoulder. The features, contorted into an awful grin, seemed to leer at the horrified nobleman.

For the first time that night, Murilo's resolution wavered. He cast an uncertain glance back the way he had come. Then the memory of the headsman's block and axe steeled him, and he crossed the room, swerving to avoid the grinning horror sprawled in its midst. Though he had never seen the man before, he knew from former descriptions that it was Joka, Nabonidus's saturnine servant.

He peered through a curtained doorway into a broad circular chamber banded by a gallery halfway between the polished floor and the lofty ceiling. This chamber was furnished as if for a king. In the midst of it stood an ornate mahogany table loaded with vessels of wine and rich viands. And Murilo stiffened. In a great chair whose broad back was towards him, he saw a figure whose habiliments were familiar. He glimpsed an arm in a red sleeve resting on the arm of the chair; the head, clad in the familiar scarlet hood of the gown, was bent forward as in meditation. Just so had Murilo seen Nabonidus sit a hundred times in the royal court.

Cursing the pounding of his own heart, the young man stole across the chamber, sword extended, his whole frame poised for the thrust. His prey did not move, nor seem to hear his cautious advance. Was the Red Priest asleep, or was it a corpse which slumped in the great chair? The length of a single stride separated Murilo from his enemy, when suddenly the man in the chair rose and faced him.

The blood went suddenly from Murilo's features. His sword fell from his fingers and rang on the polished floor. A terrible cry broke from his livid lips; it was followed by the thud of a falling body. Then once more silence reigned over the house of the Red Priest.

II

Shortly after Murilo left the dungeon where Conan the Cimmerian was confined, Athicus brought the prisoner a platter of

food which included, amongst other things, a huge joint of beef and a tankard of ale. Conan fell to voraciously, and Athicus made a final round of the cells to see that all was in order, and that none should witness the pretended prison-break. It was while he was so occupied that a squad of guardsmen marched into the prison and placed him under arrest. Murilo had been mistaken when he assumed this arrest denoted discovery of Conan's planned escape. It was another matter; Athicus had become careless in his dealings with the underworld, and one of his past sins had caught up with him.

Another gaoler took his place—a stolid, dependable creature whom no amount of bribery could have shaken from his duty. He was unimaginative, but he had an exalted idea of the importance of his job.

After Athicus had been marched away to be formally arraigned before a magistrate, this gaoler made the rounds of the cells as a matter of routine. As he passed that of Conan, his sense of propriety was shocked and outraged to see the prisoner free of his chains and in the act of gnawing the last shreds of meat from a huge beef-bone. The gaoler was so upset that he made the mistake of entering the cell alone, without calling guards from other parts of the prison. It was his first mistake in the line of duty, and his last. Conan brained him with the beef-bone, took his poignard and his keys, and made a leisurely departure. As Murilo had said, only one guard was on duty there at night. The Cimmerian passed himself outside the walls of the prison by means of the keys he had taken, and presently emerged into the outer air, as free as if Murilo's plan had been successful.

In the shadows of the prison walls, Conan paused to decide his next course of action. It occurred to him that since he had escaped through his own actions, he owed nothing to Murilo; yet it had been the young nobleman who had removed his chains and had the food sent to him without either of which his escape would have been impossible. Conan decided that he was indebted to Murilo, and since he was a man who discharged his obligations eventually, he determined to carry out his

promise to the young aristocrat. But first he had some business of his own to attend to.

He discarded his ragged tunic and moved off through the night, naked except for a loincloth. As he went, he fingered the poignard he had captured—a murderous weapon with a broad double-edged blade, nineteen inches long. He slunk along alleys and shadowed plazas until he came to the district which was his destination—The Maze. Along its labyrinthine ways he went with the certainty of familiarity. It was indeed a maze of black alleys and enclosed courts and devious ways; of furtive sounds and stenches. There was no paving on the streets; mud and filth mingled in an unsavoury mass. Sewers were unknown; refuse was dumped into the alleys to form reeking heaps and puddles. Unless a man walked with care, he was likely to lose his footing and plunge waist-deep into nauseous pools. Nor was it uncommon to stumble over a corpse lying with its throat cut or its head knocked in the mud. Honest folk shunned The Maze with good reason.

Conan reached his destination without being seen, just as one he wished fervently to meet was leaving it. As the Cimmerian slunk into the courtyard below, the girl who had sold him to the police was taking leave of her new lover in a chamber one flight up. This young thug, her door closed behind him, groped his way down a creaking flight of stairs, intent on his own meditations, which, like those of the most of the denizens of The Maze, had to do with the unlawful acquirement of property. Part way down the stairs he halted suddenly, his hair standing up. A vague bulk crouched in the darkness before him, a pair of eyes blazed like the eyes of a hunting beast. A beast-like snarl was the last thing he heard in life, as the monster lurched against him, and a keen blade ripped through his belly. He gave one gasping cry and slumped down limply on the stairway.

The barbarian loomed above him for an instant, ghoul-like, his eyes burning in the gloom. He knew the sound was heard, but the people in The Maze were careful to attend to their own business. A death-cry on darkened stairs was nothing unusual.

Later, someone would venture out to investigate, but only after a reasonable lapse of time.

Conan went up the stairs and halted at a door he knew well of old. It was fastened within, but his blade passed between the door and the jam and lifted the bar. He stepped inside, closing the door after him, and facing the girl who had betrayed him to the police.

The wench was sitting cross legged in her shift on her unkempt bed. She turned white and stared at him as if at a ghost. She had heard the cry from the stairs and she saw the red stain on the poignard in his hand. But she was too filled with terror on her own account to waste any time lamenting the fate of her lover. She began to beg for her life, almost incoherent with terror. Conan did not reply; he merely stood and glared at her with his burning eyes, testing the edge of his poignard with a calloused thumb.

At last he crossed the chamber, while she cowered back against the wall, sobbing frantic pleas for mercy. Grasping her yellow locks with no gentle hand he dragged her off the bed. Thrusting his blade back in its sheath, he tucked his squirming captive under his left arm and strode to the window. Like most houses of that type, a ledge encircled each storey, caused by the continuance of the window ledges. Conan kicked the window open and stepped out on that narrow band. If any had been near or awake they would have witnessed the bizarre sight of a man moving carefully along the ledge, carrying a kicking half-naked wench under his arm. They would have been no more puzzled than the girl.

Reaching the spot he sought, Conan halted, gripping the wall with his free hand. Inside the building rose a sudden clamour, showing that the body had at last been discovered. His captive whimpered and twisted, renewing her importunities. Conan glanced down into the muck and slime of the alleys below; he listened briefly to the clamour inside and the pleas of the wench; then he dropped her with great accuracy into a cesspool. He enjoyed her kickings and flounderings and the concentrated venom of her profanity for a few seconds, and even allowed himself a great rumble of laughter. Then he lifted his head,

listened to the growing tumult within the building and decided it was time for him to kill Nabonidus.

III

It was a reverberating clang of metal that aroused Murilo. He groaned and struggled dazedly to a sitting posture. About him all was silence and darkness, and for an instant he was sickened with the fear that he was blind. Then he remembered what had gone before, and his flesh crawled. By the sense of touch he found that he was lying on a floor of evenly joined stone slabs. Further groping discovered a wall of the same material. He rose and leaned against it, trying in vain to orient himself. That he was in some sort of a prison seemed certain, but where and how long, he was unable to guess. He remembered dimly a clashing noise, and wondered if it had been the iron door of his dungeon closing on him, or if it betokened the entrance of an executioner.

At this thought he shuddered profoundly and began to feel his way along the wall. Momentarily he expected to encounter the limits of his prison, but after a while he came to the conclusion that he was travelling down a corridor. He kept to the wall, fearful of pits or other traps, and was presently aware of something near him in the blackness. He could see nothing, but either his ears had caught a stealthy sound or some subconscious sense warned him. He stopped short, his hair standing on end; as surely as he lived he felt the presence of some living creature crouching in the darkness in front of him.

He thought his heart would stop when a voice hissed in barbaric accents: 'Murilo! Is it you?'

'Conan!' Limp from the reaction, the young nobleman groped in the darkness and his hands encountered a pair of great naked shoulders.

'A good thing I recognised you,' grunted the barbarian. 'I was about to stick you like a fattened pig.'

'Where are we, in Mitra's name?'

'In the pits under the Red Priest's house; but why——'

'What is the time?'

'Not long after midnight.'

Murilo shook his head, trying to assemble his scattered wits.

'What are you doing here?' demanded the Cimmerian.

'I came to kill Nabonidus. I heard they had changed the guard at your prison.'

'They did . . .' growled Conan. 'I broke the new gaoler's head and walked out. I would have been here hours ago but I had some personal business to attend to. Well, shall we hunt for Nabonidus?'

Murilo shuddered. 'Conan, we are in the house of the archfiend. I came seeking a human enemy; I found a hairy devil out of hell!'

Conan grunted uncertainly; fearless as a wounded tiger as far as human foes were concerned, he had all the superstitious dreads of the primitive.

'I gained access to the house,' Murio whispered, as if the darkness were full of listening ears. 'In the outer gardens I found Nabonidus's dog mauled to death. Within the house I came upon Joka, the servant. His neck had been broken. Then I saw Nabonidus himself seated in his chair, clad in his accustomed garb. At first I thought he too was dead. I stole up to stab him. He rose and faced me. Gods!' The memory of the horror struck Murilo momentarily speechless as he relived that awful instant.

'Conan,' he whispered. 'it was no *man* that stood before me! In body and posture it was not unlike a man, but from the scarlet hood of the priest grinned a face of madness and nightmare. It was covered with black hair, from which small pig-like eyes glared redly; its nose was flat, with great flaring nostrils; its loose lips writhed back, disclosing huge yellow fangs, like the teeth of a dog. The hands that hung from the scarlet sleeves were misshapen and likewise covered with black hair. All this I saw in one glance and then I was overcome with horror; my senses left me and I swooned.'

'What then?' muttered the Cimmerian uneasily.

'I recovered consciousness only a short time ago; the monster must have thrown me into these pits. Conan, I have suspected

that Nabonidus was not wholly human! He is a demon—a were-thing! By day he moves among humanity in the guise of man, and by night he takes on his true aspect.'

'That's evident,' answered Conan. 'Everyone knows there are men who take the forms of wolves at will. But why did he kill his servants?'

'Who can delve into the mind of a devil?' replied Murilo. 'Our present interest is in getting out of this place. Human weapons cannot harm a were-man. How did you get in here?'

'Through the sewer. I reckoned on the gardens being guarded. The sewers connect with a tunnel that lets into these pits. I thought to find some door leading up into the house unbolted.'

'Then let us escape by the way you came,' said Murilo. 'To the devil with it! Once out of this snake-den we'll take our chance with the King's guardsmen and risk a flight from the city. Lead on!'

'Useless!' grunted the Cimmerian. 'The way to the sewers is barred. As I entered the tunnel an iron grille crashed down from the roof. If I had not moved quicker than a flash of lightning its spearheads would have pinned me to the floor like a worm. When I tried to lift it, it wouldn't move. An elephant couldn't shake it. Nor could anything bigger than a rabbit squirm between the bars.'

Murilo cursed, an icy hand playing up and down his spine. He might have known Nabonidus would not leave any entrance into his house unguarded. Had Conan not possessed the steel-spring quickness of a wild thing, that falling portcullis would have skewered him. Doubtless his walking through the tunnel had sprung some hidden catch that released it from the roof. As it was, both were trapped living.

'There's but one thing to do,' said Murilo, sweating profusely. 'That's to search for some other exit; doubtless they are all set with traps but we have no other choice.'

The barbarian grunted agreement and the companions began groping their way at random down the corridor. Even at that moment, something occurred to Murilo.

'How did you recognise me in this blackness?' he demanded. 'I smelled the perfume you put on your hair when you came

to my cell,' answered Conan 'I smelled it again a while ago when I was crouching in the dark and preparing to rip you open!'

Murilo put a lock of his black hair to his nostrils; even so the scent was barely apparent to his civilised senses and he realised how keen must be the organs of the barbarian.

Instinctively his hand went to his scabbard as they groped onward and he cursed to find it empty. At that moment a faint glow became apparent ahead of them, and presently they came to a sharp bend in the corridor about which the light filtered greyly. Together they peered round the corner, and Murilo leaning against his companion, felt his huge frame stiffen. The young nobleman had also seen it—the body of a man, half-naked, lying limply in the corridor beyond the bend, vaguely illuminated by a radiance which seemed to emanate from a broad silver disc on the farther wall. A strange familiarity about the recumbent figure, which lay face down, stirred Murilo with inexplicable and monstrous conjectures. Motioning the Cimmerian to follow him, he stole forward and bent over the body. Overcoming a certain repugnance, he grasped it and turned it on its back. An incredulous oath escaped him; the Cimmerian grunted explosively.

'Nabonidus! The Red Priest!', ejaculated Murilo, his brain a dizzy vortex of whirling amazement. 'Then who—what—'

The priest groaned and stirred. With cat-like quickness Conan bent over him, poignard poised above his heart. Murilo caught his wrist.

'Wait. Don't kill him yet—'

'Why not?' demanded the Cimmerian. 'He has cast off his were-guise and sleeps. Will you awaken him to tear us to pieces?'

'No, wait!' said Murilo, trying to collect his jumbled wits. 'Look! He is not sleeping—see that great blue welt on his shaven temple. He has been knocked senseless. He may have been lying here for hours.'

'I thought you swore you saw him in beastly shape in the house above?' said Conan.

'I did! Or else—he's coming to! Keep back your blade,

Conan. There is a mystery here even darker than I thought. I must have words with this priest before we kill him.'

Nabonidus lifted a hand vaguely to his bruised temple, mumbled and opened his eyes. For an instant they were blank and empty of intelligence; then life came back to them with a jerk, and he sat up, staring at the companions. Even though a terrific jolt had temporarily addled his razor-keen brain, it was functioning with its accustomed vigour again. His eyes shot swiftly about him, then came back to rest on Murilo's face.

'You honour my poor house, young sir,' he laughed coolly, glancing at the great figure that loomed behind. 'You have brought a bravo, I see. Was your sword not sufficient to sever the life of my humble self?'

'Enough of this!' impatiently returned Murilo. 'How long have you lain here?'

'A peculiar question to put to a man just recovering consciousness,' answered the priest. 'I do not know what time it is now. But it lacked an hour or so of midnight when I was set upon.'

'Then who is it who masquerades in your gown in the house above?' demanded Murilo.

'That will be Thak,' answered Nabonidus ruefully, fingering his bruises. 'Yes, that will be Thak. And in my gown! The dog!'

Conan, who comprehended none of this, stirred restlessly and growled something in his own tongue. Nabonidus glanced at him whimsically.

'Your bully's knife yearns for my heart, Murilo,' he said. 'I thought you might be wise enough to take my warning and leave the city.'

'How was I to know that was to be granted me?' returned Murilo. 'At any rate, my interests are here.'

'You are in good company with that cut-throat,' murmured Nabonidus. 'I had suspected you for some time. That was why I caused that pallid court secretary to disappear. Before he died he told me many things, among others the name of the young nobleman who bribed him to filch State secrets, which the nobleman in turn sold to rival powers. Are you not ashamed of yourself, Murilo, you white-handed thief?'

'I have no more cause for shame than you, you vulture-hearted plunderer,' answered Murilo promptly. 'You exploit a whole kingdom for your personal greed, and under the guise of disinterested statesmanship you swindle the King, beggar the rich, oppress the poor and sacrifice the whole future of the nation for your ruthless ambition. You are no more than a fat hog with his snout in the trough. You are a greater thief than I am. This Cimmerian is the most honest man of the three of us, because he steals and murders openly.'

'Well, then, we are all rogues together,' agreed Nabonidus equably. 'And what now? My life?'

'When I saw the ear of that secretary that had disappeared, I knew I was doomed,' said Murilo abruptly. 'and I believed you would invoke the authority of the King. Was I right?'

'Quite so,' answered the priest. 'A Court secretary is easy to do away with, but you are a bit too prominent. I had intended telling the King a jest about you in the morning.'

'A jest that would have cost me my head,' muttered Murilo. 'Then the King is unaware of my--foreign enterprises?'

'As yet,' sighed Nabonidus. 'And now since I see your companion has his knife, I fear that jest will never be told.'

'You should know how to get out of these rat-dens,' said Murilo. 'Suppose I agree to spare your life? Will you help us to escape and keep silent about my thievery?'

'When did a priest keep an oath?' complained Conan, comprehending the trend of the conversation. 'Let me cut his throat; I want to see what colour his blood is. They say in The Maze that his heart is black, so his blood must be black too——'

'Be quiet,' whispered Murilo. 'If he does not show us the way out of these pits we may rot here. Well, Nabonidus, what do you say?'

'What does a wolf with his leg in a trap say?' laughed the priest. 'I am in your power and if we are to escape we must aid one another. I swear, if we survive this adventure, to forget all your shifty dealings. I swear by the soul of Mitra!'

'I am satisfied,' muttered Murilo. 'Even the Red Priest would not break that oath. Now to get out of here. My friend entered

by way of the tunnel, but a grille fell behind him and blocked the way. Can you cause it to be lifted?

'Not from these pits,' answered the priest. 'The control-lever is in the chamber above the tunnel. There is only one other way out of these pits, which I will show you. But tell me, how did you come here?'

Murilo told him in a few words and Nabonidus nodded, rising stiffly. He limped down the corridor which here widened into a sort of vast chamber, and approached the distant silver disc. As they advanced the light increased, though it never became anything but a dim shadowy radiance. Near the disc they saw a narrow stair leading upward.

'That is the other exit,' said Nabonidus. 'And I strongly doubt if the door at the head is bolted. But I have an idea that he who would go through that door had better cut his own throat first. Look into the disc.'

What had seemed a silver plate, was in effect, a great mirror set in the wall. A confusing system of copperlike tubes jutted out from the wall above it, bending down towards it at right-angles. Glancing into these tubes, Murilo saw a bewildering array of smaller mirrors. He turned his attention to the larger mirror in the wall and ejaculated in amazement. Peering over his shoulder, Conan grunted.

They seemed to be looking through a broad window into a well-lighted chamber. There were broad mirrors on the walls, with velvet hangings between; there were silken couches, chairs of ebony and ivory and curtained doorways leading off from the chamber. And before one doorway which was not curtained sat a bulky black object that contrasted grotesquely with the richness of the chamber.

Murilo felt his blood freeze again as he looked at the horror which seemed to be staring directly into his eyes. Involuntarily he recoiled from the mirror, while Conan thrust his head truculently forward till his jaws almost touched the surface, growling some threat or defiance in his own barbaric tongue.

'In Mitra's name, Nabonidus,' gasped Murilo, shaken. 'What is it?'

'That is Thak,' answered the priest, caressing his temple.

'Some would call him an ape, but he is almost as different from a real ape as he is different from a real man. His people dwell far to the East, in the mountains that fringe the eastern frontiers of Zamora. There are not many of them, but if they are not exterminated, I believe they will become human beings in perhaps a hundred thousand years. They are in the formative stage; they are neither apes, as their remote ancestors were, nor men, as their remote descendants may be. They dwell in the high crags of well-nigh inaccessible mountains, knowing nothing of fire or the making of shelter or garments, or the use of weapons. Yet they have a language of a sort, consisting mainly of grunts and clicks.

'I took Thak when he was a cub and he learned what I taught him much more swiftly and thoroughly than any true animal could have done. He was at once bodyguard and servant. But I forgot that, being partly a man, he could not be submerged into a mere shadow of myself, like a true animal. Apparently his semi-brain retained impressions of hate, resentment and some sort of bestial ambition of its own. At any rate, he struck when I least expected it. Last night, he suddenly seemed to go mad. His actions had all the appearance of bestial insanity, yet I know that they must have been the result of long and careful planning.

'I heard a sound of fighting in the garden, and going to investigate—for I believed it was yourself being dragged down by my watchdog—I saw Thak emerge from the shrubbery, dripping with blood. Before I was aware of his intention he sprang at me with an awful scream and struck me senseless. I remember no more, but can only surmise that, following some whim of his semi-human brain, he stripped me of my gown and cast me still living into the pits—for what reason only the gods can guess. He must have killed the dog when he came from the garden and after he struck me down he evidently killed Joka, as you saw the man lying dead in the house. Joka would have come to my aid, even against Thak, whom he always hated.'

Murilo stared in the mirror at the creature which sat with such monstrous patience before the closed door. He shuddered

at the sight of the great black hands, thickly grown with hair that was almost fur-like. The body was thick, broad and stooped. The unnaturally wide shoulders had burst the scarlet gown, and on these shoulders Murilo noted the same thick growth of black hair. The face peering from the scarlet hood was utterly bestial, and yet Murilo realised that Nabonidus spoke the truth when he said that Thak was not wholly a beast. There was something in the red murky eyes, something in the creature's clumsy posture, something in the whole appearance of the thing, that set it apart from the truly animal. That monstrous body housed a brain and soul that were just budding awfully into something vaguely human. Murilo stood aghast as he recognised a faint and hideous kinship between his kind and that squatting monstrosity, and he was nauseated by a fleeting realisation of the abyss of bellowing bestiality up through which humanity had painfully toiled.

'Surely he sees us?' muttered Conan. 'Why does he not charge us? He could break this window with ease.'

Murilo realised that Conan supposed the mirror to be a window through which they were looking.

'He does not see us,' answered the priest. 'We are looking into the chamber above us. That door that Thak is guarding is the one at the head of the stairs. It is simply an arrangement of mirrors. Do you see those mirrors on the walls? They transmit the reflection of the room into these tubes, down which other mirrors carry it to reflect it at last on an enlarged scale in this great mirror.'

Murilo realised that the priest must be centuries ahead of his generation to perfect such an invention; but Conan put it down to witchcraft, and troubled his head no more about it.

'I constructed these pits for a place of refuge as well as a dungeon,' the priest was saying, 'There are times when I have taken refuge here and through these mirrors watched doom fall upon those who sought me with ill intent.'

'But why is Thak watching that door?' demanded Murilo.

'He must have heard the falling of the grating in the tunnel. It is connected with bells in the chambers above. He knows someone is in the pits, and he is waiting for him to come up the

stairs. Oh, he has learned well the lessons I taught him. He has seen what happened to men who came through that door when I tugged at the rope that hangs on yonder wall, and he waits to mimic me.'

'And while he waits, what are we to do?' demanded Murilo.

'There is naught we can do, except watch him. As long as he is in that chamber we dare not ascend the stairs. He has the strength of a true gorilla and could easily tear us all to pieces. But he does not need to exert his muscles; if we open that door he has but to tug that rope and blast us into eternity.'

'How?'

'I bargained to help you escape,' answered the priest, 'not to betray my secrets.'

Murilo started to reply, then stiffened suddenly. A stealthy hand had parted the curtains of one of the doorways. Between them appeared a dark face whose glittering eyes fixed menacingly on the squat form in the scarlet robe.

'Petreus!' hissed Nabonidus. 'Mitra, what a gathering of vultures!'

The face remained framed between the parted curtains. Over the intruder's shoulder other faces peered—dark thin faces alight with sinister eagerness.

'What do they want here?' muttered Murilo unconsciously lowering his voice, though he knew they could not hear him.

'Why, what would Petreus and his ardent young nationalists be doing in the house of the Red Priest?' laughed Nabonidus. 'Look how eagerly they glare at the arch enemy. They have fallen into your error; it should be amusing to watch their expressions when they are disillusioned.'

Murilo did not reply. The whole affair had a distinctly unreal atmosphere. He felt as if he were watching the play of puppets or a disembodied ghost himself, impersonally viewing the actions of the living, his presence unseen and unsuspected.

He saw Petreus put his finger warningly to his lips and nod to his fellow-conspirators. The young nobleman could not tell if Thak were aware of the intruders. The ape-man's position had not changed, as he sat with his back to the door through which the young men were gliding.

'They had the same idea that you had,' Nabonidus was muttering at his ear. 'Only their reasons were patriotic rather than selfish. Easy to gain admittance to my house now that the dog is dead. Oh, what a chance to rid myself of their menace once and for all. If I were sitting where Thak sits—a leap to the wall—a tug on the rope—'

Petreus had placed one foot lightly over the threshold of the chamber. His fellows were at his heels, their daggers glinting dully. Suddenly Thak rose and wheeled towards them. The unexpected horror of his appearance, where they had thought to behold the hated but familiar countenance of Nabonidus, wrought havoc with their nerves as the same spectacle had wrought havoc with Murilo's. With a shriek Petreus recoiled, carrying his companions backwards with him. They stumbled and floundered over one another, and in that instant Thak, covering the distance in one prodigious grotesque leap, caught and jerked powerfully at a thick velvet rope which hung near the doorway.

Instantly the curtains whipped back on either hand, leaving the door clear and down across it something flashed with a peculiar silvery blur.

'He remembered!' Nabonidus was exulting. 'The beast is half a man. He has seen the doom performed and he remembered! Watch now! Watch!'

Murilo saw that it was a panel of heavy glass that had fallen across the doorway. Through it he saw the pallid faces of the conspirators. Petreus, throwing out his hands as if to ward off a charge from Thak, encountered the transparent barrier; and, from his gesture, said something to his companions. Now that the curtains were drawn back, the men in the pits could see all that took place in the chamber that contained the nationalists. Completely unnerved, these ran across the chamber toward the door by which they had apparently entered, only to halt suddenly, as if stopped by an invisible wall.

'The jerk of that rope seals that chamber,' laughed Nabonidus. 'It is simple; the glass panels work in grooves in the doorways. Jerking the rope trips the spring that holds them. They slide down and lock in place, and can only be worked

from outside. The glass is unbreakable; a man with a mallet could not shatter it. Ah!

The trapped men were in a hysteria of fright; they ran wildly from one door to another, beating vainly at the crystal walls, shaking their fists wildly at the implacable black shape which squatted outside. Then one drew back his head, glared upward and began to scream, to judge from the working of his lips, while he pointed to the ceiling.

'The fall of the panels released the Clouds of Doom,' said the Red Priest with a wild laugh. 'The dust of the grey lotus from the Swamps of the Dead, beyond the land of Khitai.'

In the middle of the ceiling hung a cluster of gold buds; these had opened like the petals of a great carven rose, and from them billowed a grey mist that swiftly filled the chamber. Instantly the scene changed from one of hysteria to one of madness and horror. The trapped men began to stagger; they ran in drunken circles. Froth dripped from their lips, which twisted as in awful laughter. Raging, they fell upon one another with daggers and teeth, slashing, tearing, slaying in a holocaust of madness. Murilo turned sick as he watched, and was glad that he could not hear the screams and howls with which that doomed chamber was ringing. Like pictures on the lantern screen, it was silent.

Outside the chamber of horror Thak was leaping up and down in brutish glee, tossing his long hairy arms on high. At Murilo's shoulder Nabonidus was laughing like a fiend.

'Ha, a good stroke, Petreus! That fairly disembowelled him! Now one for you, my patriotic friend! So! They are all down and the living tear the flesh of the dead with their slavering teeth.'

Murilo shuddered. Behind him the Cimmerian swore softly in his uncouth tongue. Only death was to be seen in the chamber of the grey mist; torn, gashed and mangled, the conspirators lay in a red heap; gaping mouths and blood-dabbled faces staring blankly upward through the slowly swirling eddies of grey.

Thak, stooping like a giant gnome, approached the wall where the rope hung, and gave it a peculiar sideways pull.

'He is opening the farther door,' said Nabonidus. 'By Mitra, he is more of a human than even I had guessed. See, the mist swirls out of the chamber and is dissipated. He waits, to be safe. Now he raises the other panel. He is cautious—he knows the doom of the grey lotus, which brings madness and death. By Mitra!'

Murilo jerked about at the electric quality of the exclamation.

'Our one chance,' replied Nabonidus. 'If he leaves the chamber above for a few minutes, we will risk a dash up those stairs.'

Suddenly tense, they watched the monster waddle through the doorway and vanish. With the lifting of the glass panel the curtains had fallen again, hiding the chamber of death.

'We must chance it!' Nabonidus gasped, and Murilo saw perspiration break out on his face. 'Perhaps he will be disposing of the bodies as he has seen me do. Quick! Follow me up those stairs.'

He ran towards the steps and up them with an agility that amazed Murilo. The young man and the barbarian were close at his heels and they heard his gusty sigh of relief as he threw open the door at the top of the stairs. They burst into the broad chamber they had seen mirrored below. That was nowhere to be seen.

'He's in that chamber with the corpses,' exclaimed Murilo. 'Why not trap him there, as he trapped them?'

'No, no!' gasped Nabonidus, an unaccustomed pallor tinging his features. 'We do not know that he is in there. He might emerge before we could reach the trap-rope anyway! Follow me into this corridor; I must reach my chamber and obtain weapons which will destroy him. This corridor is the only one opening from this chamber which is not set with a trap of some kind.'

They followed him swiftly through a curtained doorway opposite the door of the death-chamber, and came into a corridor, into which various chambers opened. With fumbling haste Nabonidus began to try the doors on each side. They were locked, as was the door at the other end of the corridor.

'By Anu!' The Red Priest leaned against the wall, his skin

ashen. 'The doors are locked and Thak took my keys from me. We are trapped!'

Murilo stared appalled to see the man in such a state of nerves and Nabonidus pulled himself together with an effort.

'The beast has me in a panic,' he said. 'If you had seen him tear men as I have seen—well, Mitra aid us, but we must fight him now with what the gods have given us. Come!'

He led them back to the curtained doorway, and peered into the great chamber in time to see Thak emerge from the opposite doorway. It was apparent that the beast-man suspected something. His small, close-set ears twitched; he glared angrily about him, and approaching the nearest doorway, tore aside the curtains to look behind them.

Nabonidus drew back, shaking like a leaf. He gripped Conan's shoulder. 'Man, do you dare pit your knife against his fangs?'

The Cimmerian's eyes blazed in answer.

'Quick!' The Red Priest whispered, thrusting him behind the curtains close against the wall. 'As he will find us soon enough, we will draw him to us. As he rushes past you, sink your blade in his back if you can. You, Murilo, show yourself to him, and then flee up the corridor. Mitra knows, we have no chance with him in hand-to-hand combat, but we are doomed anyway when he finds us.'

Murilo felt his blood congealing his veins, but he steeled himself and stepped outside the doorway. Instantly Thak, on the other side of the chamber, wheeled, glared and charged with a thunderous roar. His scarlet hood had fallen back, revealing his black, misshapen head; his black hands and red robe were splashed with a brighter red. He was like a crimson and black nightmare, as he rushed across the chamber, fangs bared, his bowed legs hurtling his body along at a terrifying gait.

Murilo turned back and ran into the corridor, and quick as he was, the shaggy horror was almost at his heels. Then, as the monster rushed past the curtains, from among them there catapulted a great form that struck full on the ape-man's shoulders, at the same time driving the poignard into the brutish

back. Thak screamed horribly as the impact knocked him off his feet, and the combatants hit the floor together. Instantly there began a whirl and thrash of limbs, the tearing and rending of a fiendish battle.

Murilo saw that the barbarian had locked his limbs about the ape-man's torso and was striving to maintain his position on the monster's back while he butchered it with his poignard. Thak, on the other hand was striving to dislodge his clinging foe, to drag him round within reach of the giant fangs that gaped for his flesh. In a whirlwind of blows and scarlet tatters they rolled along the corridor, revolving so swiftly that Murilo dared not use the chair he had caught up, lest he strike the Cimmerian. And he saw that in spite of the handicap of Conan's first hold, and the voluminous robe that lashed and wrapped about the ape-man's limbs and prevented free movement, Thak's giant strength was swiftly prevailing. Inexorably he was dragging the Cimmerian round in front of him. The ape-man had taken punishment enough to kill a dozen men. Conan's poignard had sunk again and again into his torso, shoulders and bull-like neck; he was streaming blood from a score of wounds, but unless the blade quickly reached some vital spot, Thak's inhuman vitality would survive to finish the Cimmerian and, after him, his companions.

Conan was fighting like a wild beast himself, in silence, except for his gasps of effort. The black talons of the monster and the awful grasp of those misshapen hands ripped and tore at him, the grinning jaws gaped for his throat. Then Murilo, seeing an opening, sprang and swung the chair with all his power, and with force enough to have brained a human being. The chair glanced from Thak's slanted black skull; but the stunned monster momentarily relaxed his rending grasp and in that instant Conan, gasping and streaming blood, plunged forward and sank his poignard to the hilt in the ape-man's heart.

With a convulsive shiver the beast-man started from the floor, then sank limply back. His fierce eyes set and glazed, his thick limbs quivered and became rigid.

Conan staggered dizzily up, shaking the sweat and blood out of his eyes. Blood dripped from his poignard and fingers, and

trickled in rivulets down his thighs, arms and breast. Murilo caught at him to support him, but the barbarian shook him off impatiently.

'When I cannot stand alone, it will be time to die,' he mumbled through mashed lips. 'But I'd like a flagon of wine.'

Nabonidus was staring down at the still figure as if he could not believe his own eyes. Black, hairy, abhorrent, the monster lay grotesque in the tatters of the scarlet robe; yet more human than bestial, even so, and possessed somehow of a vague and terrible pathos.

Even the Cimmerian sensed this, for he panted, 'I have slain a *man* tonight, not a *beast*. I will count him among the chiefs whose souls I have sent into the dark, and my women will sing of him.'

Nabonidus stooped and picked up a bunch of keys on a golden chain. They had fallen from the ape-man's girdle during the battle. Motioning his companions to follow him, he led them to a chamber, unlocked the door and led the way inside. It was illumined like the others. The Red Priest took a vessel of wine from a table and filled crystal beakers. As his companions drank thirstily, he murmured, 'What a night! It is nearly dawn now. What of you, my friends?'

'I'll dress Conan's hurts, if you will fetch me bandages and the like,' said Murilo, and Nabonidus nodded, and moved towards the door that led into the corridor. Something about his bowed head caused Murilo to watch him sharply. At the door the Red Priest wheeled suddenly. His face had undergone a transformation. His eyes gleamed with their old fire; his lips laughed soundlessly.

'Rogues together!' His voice rang with its accustomed mockery. 'But not fools together. You are the fool, Murilo!'

'What do you mean?' Murilo started forward.

'Back!' Nabonidus's voice cracked like a whip. 'Another step and I will blast you!'

Murilo's blood turned cold as he saw that the Red Priest's hand grasped a thick velvet rope which hung among the curtains just outside the door.

'What treachery is this?' cried Murilo. 'You swore——'

'I swore I would not tell the King a jest concerning you! I did not swear not to take matters into my own hands if I could. Do you think I would pass up such an opportunity! In ordinary circumstances, I would not dare to kill you myself without the sanction of the King, but now none will ever know. You will go into the acid vats along with Thak and the nationalist fools, and none will be the wiser. What a night this has been for me! If I have lost some valuable servants, I have nevertheless rid myself of some dangerous enemies. Stand back! I am over the threshold and you cannot possibly reach me before I tug this cord and send you to hell. Not the grey lotus this time, but something just as effective. Nearly every chamber in my house is a trap. And so, Murilo, fool that you are——'

Too quickly for the sight to follow, Conan picked up a stool and threw it. Nabonidus instinctively threw up his arm with a cry, but not in time. The missile crunched against his head and the Red Priest swayed and fell face downward in a slowly widening pool of dark crimson.

'His blood was red, after all!' grunted the Cimmerian.

Murilo raked back his sweat-plastered hair with a shaking hand as he leaned against the table, weak from the reaction of relief.

'It is dawn,' he said. 'Let us get out of here before we fall afoul of some other doom. If we can climb the outer wall without being seen, we won't be connected with this night's work. Let the police write their own explanation.'

He glanced at the body of the Red Priest where it lay etched in crimson and shrugged his shoulders.

'He was the fool, after all; had he not paused to taunt us, he could have trapped us easily.'

'Well,' said the Cimmerian tranquilly, 'he's travelled the road all rogues must walk at last. I'd like to loot the house, but I suppose we'd best go.'

As they emerged into the dimness of the dawn-whitened garden, Murilo said, 'The Red Priest has gone into the dark, so my road is clear in the city, and I have nothing to fear. But what of you? There is still the matter of that priest in The Maze and——'

'I'm tired of the city anyway,' grinned the Cimmerian. 'You mentioned a horse waiting at the Rats' Den. I'm curious to see how fast a horse can carry me into another kingdom. There's many a highway I want to travel before I walk the road Nabonidus walked this night.'

THE THING IN THE CELLAR

DAVID H. KELLER

IT was a huge cellar, entirely out of proportion to the size of the house above it. The owner admitted that it was probably built for a distinctly different kind of structure from that which rose above it. Probably the first house had been burned and poverty had caused a diminution of the dwelling erected to take its place.

A winding stone stairway connected the cellar with the kitchen. Round the base of this series of steps successive owners of the house had placed their firewood, winter vegetables and junk. The junk had gradually been pushed back till it rose, head high, in a barricade of uselessness. What was behind that barricade no one knew and no one cared. For some hundreds of years no one had crossed it to penetrate to the black reaches of the cellar behind it.

At the top of the steps, separating the kitchen from the cellar, was a stout oaken door. This door was, in a way, as peculiar and out of relation to the rest of the house as the cellar. It was a strange kind of door to find in a modern house, and certainly a most unusual door to find in the inside of the house—thick, stoutly built, dexterously rabbeted together, with huge wrought iron hinges and a lock that looked as though it came from Castle Despair. Separating a house from the outside world, such a door would be excusable; swinging between kitchen and cellar it seemed peculiarly inappropriate.

From the earliest months of his life, Tommy Tucker seemed unhappy in the kitchen. In the front parlour, in the formal dining-room, and especially on the first floor of the house, he

acted like a normal, healthy child; but carry him to the kitchen and he began at once to cry. His parents, being plain people, ate in the kitchen save when they had company. Being poor, Mrs. Tucker did most of her work, though occasionally she had a charwoman in to do the extra Saturday cleaning, and thus much of her time was spent in the kitchen. And Tommy stayed with her, at least as long as he was unable to walk. Much of the time he was decidedly unhappy.

When Tommy learned to crawl, he lost no time in leaving the kitchen. No sooner was his mother's back turned than the little fellow crawled as fast as he could for the doorway opening into the front of the house, the dining-room and the parlour. Once away from the kitchen he seemed happy; at least he ceased to cry. On being returned to the kitchen, his howls so thoroughly convinced the neighbours that he had colic, that more than one bowl of catnip and sage tea was brought to his assistance.

It was not until the boy learned to talk that the Tuckers had any idea as to what made him cry so hard when he was in the kitchen. In other words, the baby had to suffer for many months before he obtained at least a little relief, and even when he told his parents what was the matter they were absolutely unable to comprehend. This is not to be wondered at, because they were both hard-working, rather simple-minded persons.

What they finally learned from their little son was this: that if the cellar door was shut and securely fastened with the heavy iron lock, Tommy could at least eat a meal in peace; if the door was simply closed but not locked, he shivered with fear but kept quiet; but if the door was open, if even the slightest streak of black showed that it was not tightly shut, then the little three year old would scream himself to the point of exhaustion, especially if his tired father refused him permission to leave the kitchen.

Playing in the kitchen, the child developed two interesting habits. Rags, scraps of paper and splinters of wood were continually being pushed under the thick oak door to fill the space between the door and the sill. Whenever Mrs. Tucker opened the door there was always some trash there, placed by her son.

It annoyed her, and more than once the little fellow was thrashed for this conduct, but punishment acted in no way as a deterrent. The other habit was as singular. Once the door was closed and locked, he would rather boldly walk up to it and caress the old lock. Even when he was so small that he had to stand on tiptoe to touch it with the tips of his fingers he would touch it with slow caressing strokes; later on, as he grew, he used to kiss it.

His father, who only saw the boy at the end of the day, decided that there was no sense in such conduct, and in his masculine way tried to break the lad of his foolishness. There was of necessity, no effort on the part of the boy's hard-working parent to understand the psychology behind his son's conduct. All that the man knew was that his little son was acting in a way that was decidedly queer.

Tommy loved his mother and was willing to do anything he could to help her in the household tasks, but one thing he would not do, and never did do, and that was to fetch and carry between the house and the cellar. If his mother opened the door, he would run screaming from the room, and he never returned voluntarily till he was assured that the door was closed.

He never explained why he acted as he did. In fact, he refused to talk about it, at least to his parents, and that was just as well, because had he done so, they would simply have been more positive than ever that there was something wrong with their only child. They tried, in their own way, to break the child of his unusual habits; failing to change him at all, they decided to ignore his peculiarities.

That is, they ignored them until he became six years old and the time came for him to go to school. He was a sturdy little chap by that time, and more intelligent than the usual boys beginning in the primer class. Mr. Tucker was, at times, proud of him; the child's attitude toward the cellar door was the one thing most disturbing to the father's pride. Finally, nothing would do but that the Tucker family should call on the local physician. It was an important event in the life of the Tuckers; so important that it demanded the wearing of Sunday clothes and all that sort of thing.

'The matter is just this, Dr. Hawthorn,' said Mr. Tucker in a somewhat embarrassed manner. 'Our little Tommy is old enough to start school but he behaves childish in regard to our cellar, and the missus and I thought you could tell us what to do about it. It must be his nerves.'

'Ever since he was a baby,' continued Mrs. Tucker, taking up the thread of the conversation where her husband had paused, 'Tommy has had a great fear of the cellar. Even now, big boy that he is, he does not love me enough to fetch and carry for me through that door and down those steps. It is not natural for a child to act as he does, and what with chinking the cracks with rags and kissing the lock, he drives me to the point where I fear he may become daft-like as he grows older.'

The doctor, eager to satisfy new customers, and dimly remembering some lectures on the nervous system received when he was a medical student, asked some general questions, listened to the boy's heart, examined his lungs and looked at his eyes and finger-nails. At last he commented,

'Looks like a fine healthy boy to me.'

'Yes, all except the cellar door,' said father.

'Has he ever been sick?'

'Naught but fits once or twice when he cried himself blue in the face,' answered the mother.

'Frightened?'

'Perhaps. It was always in the kichen.'

'Suppose you go out and let me talk to Tommy by myself.'

And there sat the doctor, very much at his ease, and the little six-year-old boy very uneasy.

'Tommy, what is there in the cellar that you're afraid of?'

'I don't know.'

'Have you ever seen it?'

'No, sir.'

'Ever heard it? Smelt it?'

'No, sir.'

'Then how do you know there is something there?'

'Because.'

'Because what?'

'Because there is.'

That was as far as Tommy would go, and at last his seeming obstinacy annoyed the physician even as it had for several years annoyed Mr. Tucker. He went to the door and called the parents into the room.

'He thinks there is something down in the cellar,' he stated.

The Tuckers simply looked at each other.

'That's foolish,' commended Mr. Tucker.

'Tis just a plain cellar with junk and firewood and cider barrels in it,' added Mrs. Tucker. 'Since we moved into that house I have not missed a day without going down those stone steps and I know there is nothing there. But the lad has always screamed when the door was open. I recall now that since he was a child in arms he has always screamed when the door was open.'

'He thinks there is something there,' said the doctor.

'That is why we brought him to you,' replied the father. 'It's the child's nerves. Perhaps feetida or something will calm him.'

'I will tell you what to do,' advised the doctor. 'He thinks there is something there. Just as soon as he finds he is wrong and there is nothing there, he will forget about it. He has been humoured too much. What you want to do is to open that cellar door and make him stay by himself in the kitchen. Nail the door open so that he cannot close it. Leave him alone there for an hour, and then go and laugh at him and show him how silly it was for him to be afraid of an empty cellar. I will give you some nerve and blood tonic, and that will help, but the big thing is to show him that there is nothing to be afraid of.'

On the way back to the Tucker home, Tommy broke away from his parents. They caught him after an exciting chase and kept him between them for the rest of the way home. Once in the house he disappeared, and was found in the guest-room under the bed. The afternoon being already spoiled for Mr. Tucker, he determined to keep the child under observation for the rest of the day. Tommy ate no supper, in spite of the urgings of the unhappy mother. The dishes were washed, the evening paper read, the evening pipe smoked; and then, and only then, did Mr. Tucker take down his tool box and get out a hammer and some long nails.

'And I am going to nail the door open, Tommy, so you cannot close it, as that was what the doctor said, Tommy, and you are to be a man and stay here in the kitchen alone for an hour, and we will leave the lamp a-burning and then, when you find there is naught to be afraid of, you will be well and a real man and not something for a man to be ashamed of being the father of.'

But at the last, Mrs. Tucker kissed Tommy and cried and whispered to her husband not to do it, and to wait till the boy was larger; but nothing was to do except to nail the thick door open, so it could not be shut, and leave the boy there alone with the lamp burning and the dark open space of the doorway to look at with eyes that grew as hot and burning as the flame of the lamp.

That same day Dr. Hawthorn took supper with a class-mate of his, a man who specialised in psychiatry, and who was particularly interested in children. Hawthorn told Johnson about his newest case, the little Tucker boy, and asked him for his opinion. Johnson frowned.

'Children are odd, Hawthorn. Perhaps they are like dogs. It may be their nervous system is more acute than in the adult. We know that our eyesight is limited, also our hearing and smell. I firmly believe there are forms of life which exist in such a form that we can neither see, hear nor smell them. Fondly we delude ourselves into the fallacy of believing that they do not exist because we cannot prove their existence. This Tucker lad may have a nervous system that is peculiarly acute. He may dimly appreciate the existence of something in the cellar which is unappreciable to his parents. Evidently there is some basis in this fear of his. Now I am not saying that there is anything in the cellar. In fact, I suppose that it is just an ordinary cellar, but this boy, since he was a baby, has thought that there was something there, and that is just as bad as though there actually were. What I would like to know is what makes him think so. Give me the address and I will call tomorrow and have a talk with the little fellow.'

'What do you think of my advice?'

'Sorry, old man, but I think it was perfectly rotten. If I were

you, I would step round there on my way home and prevent them from following it. The little fellow may be badly frightened. You see, he evidently thinks there is something there.'

'But there isn't.'

'Perhaps not. No doubt he is wrong, but he thinks so.'

It all worried Dr. Hawthorn so much that he decided to take his friend's advice. It was a cold night, a foggy night, and the physician felt cold as he tramped along the streets. At last he came to the Tucker house. He remembered now that he had been there once before, long years ago, when little Tommy Tucker came into the world. There was a light in the front window and in no time at all Mr. Tucker came to the door.

'I have come to see Tommy,' said the doctor.

'He is back in the kitchen,' replied the father.

'He gave one cry but since then he has been quiet,' sobbed the wife.

'If I had let her have her way she would have opened the door, but I said to her, "Mother, now is the time to make a man out of our Tommy." And I guess he knows by now that there was naught to be afraid of. Well, the hour is up. Suppose we go and get him and put him to bed?'

'It has been a hard time for the little child,' whispered the wife.

Carrying the candle, the man walked ahead of the woman and the doctor and at last opened the kitchen door. The room was dark.

'Lamp has gone out,' said the man. 'Wait till I light it.'

'Tommy! Tommy!' called Mrs. Tucker.

But the doctor ran to where a white form was stretched on the floor. Sharply he called for more light. Trembling, he examined all that was left of little Tommy. Twitching, he looked down the open space into the cellar. At last he turned to Tucker and Tucker's wife.

'Tommy—Tommy's been hurt,' he stammered. 'I guess he's dead.'

The mother threw herself on the floor and picked up the torn, mutilated thing that had been only a little while ago her little Tommy.

The man took his hammer and drew out the nails and closed the door and locked it, and then drove in a long spike to reinforce the lock. Then he took hold of the doctor's shoulders and shook him.

'What killed him, Doctor? What killed him?' he shouted into Hawthorn's ear.

The doctor looked at him bravely in spite of the fear in his throat.

'How do I know, Tucker?' he replied. 'How do I know? Didn't you tell me that there was nothing there? Nothing down there? In the cellar?'

THE CRACK

OSWELL BLAKESTON

THE THERE is a theory, for which I have not much regard, which explains Existence as Organism. We are all part of one great Being, in the same way as corpuscles in a blood-stream are part of man. So when showers of frogs and spiders fall, as they have been reported to have quixotically done, from an appearing-point in the air somewhere, over a large city, it is only the Organism trying to adapt, foolishly and stupidly, in the manner of other phenomena of Existence. Such a pseudo-theory does make some appeal to me when fog falls on London. As a rule, I'm fond of London; it's a great lazy animal which lies on its back, staring at the sky, smoking. But when fog drifts down on London's patchwork of streets, the result is so confused and confusing that I like to imagine that the Organism is trying to think!

There had been but a mild threat of mist when I had gone out for my walk. I am one of those people who find a magic in the outskirts of London. Those who take the outer suburban fringes for granted are those who get nothing out of them. But behind each little villa, with a representation of an individual Victorian dragon stuck on the roof, lurks a different story. Sometimes I imagine the heart that throbs in the cheap furniture when a lorry thunders down the road. I imagine the woman who lies awake at night listening to the sound of the trains shunting. There is something—something here, on London's outskirts, which one gets from no other city in the world.

I know that on the day it all began I had set out, in spite of hinting haze, for a nook I had previously visited—an outskirt

park where the mildewed heads of statues lie in the middle of moss-covered paths, while plaster herons fly, in a cracked kind of way, over stagnant pools. But I had been seduced from my route by a steep side-street. Nobody except a lover of London magic can grasp the temptation of an alley tilting down too steeply, from an enchanted London hill. I was tempted and . . . I dived under a high railway-arch which looked like a bridge from one of those occult pictures of the 'nineties. I threw away my cigarette end, and it vanished into archway gloom in tiny farewell sparks. I was ready for—my own kind of adventure in discovery.

I do recall that I regretted that there was no breeze to make crumpled newspaper turn somersaults down the steep street. Also it did occur to me that it was becoming dark too early. And it did seem to take a great deal of time and labour to mount the hillock. Yet I was buoyed up at the prospect of a new tract of country in my own hinterland. On I walked, till I gained the summit, when I saw the lights which had been switched up in the arty teashop window were looking suspiciously yellow. Neglecting the many premonitions, I yet felt that the fog had stolen on me; not as a miracle, but as a collusion with some purpose. The valley was wrapped in a blanket of murk. I guessed that the best plan would be to try to retrace my steps without a moment's delay. Alack! There is not a great deal of glamour surrounding 'best plans'! I still hankered for a taste of the new district I had discovered which promised so well. Maybe it was the 'confused thinking' of the fog that had seeped into my brain. However, I began to roam a little way down a street which promised many of the delights of which I am connoisseur.

Then the fog descended in earnest, thickly pouring up the roadway. It was like a knife that sliced off the corners of one's eyes. I could only see what was directly in front of me. I heard, close at hand, but lost in impenetrable blackness, the klaxon of a floundering taxi. I tripped over a kerbstone; I stretched out my arms; found my fingertips pressing a luminous oblong. As I moved my eyes inch by inch along the surface, I understood that it was the window of an antique shop. The place, too,

would afford temporary shelter and I hoped for a suggestion which might extricate me from the difficult position in which I had almost deliberately involved myself. Perhaps there was a Tube-station just round the corner. At any rate, the man inside would know. I shoved the door and heard a bell ring.

Already there seemed to be veils of fog drifting in the shop. I stood still, with my back to the door. Nobody appeared; but I thought I was used to the ways of antique-dealers, who love to hover behind the scenes and emerge at the psychological moment of destruction. I let my eyes rove about miscellaneous antiquities littering tables and shelves. For a minute I could scarcely believe my eyes; but the little figures were indeed the figures of animals; a she-ass in porcelain, a bronze pig, a cow or shell. Now, I have a passion for statuettes, miniatures and other small reproductions of animals. A bachelor's flat is no place for the Horse of Troy. I endeavour to keep a strict sense of proportion; but one room of my flat is almost entirely devoted to tiny and exquisite replicas of animals, wrought in a multitude of materials. Here, as far as I could judge from cursory inspection, were rare pieces which I, a collector, had not even read of. The proprietor, to estimate from the extensive richness of the collection, must surely share my taste for these figures. I nearly rubbed my hands together (a habit I deplore) for I was in for a highly exhilarating, even if highly expensive, time. I walked nearer to one of the tables, when an extraordinary fact struck me; all the statues were turned with their backs towards the customers!

As I paused, I heard a sound behind me. I turned to see the most alarming antique-dealer I had ever imagined among a class that is notoriously grotesque. He was so bent that he might have been walking on four legs. His clothes were a period affectation and at no point fitted him. His face was expressionless, but with the expression of a mask which hid something evil. He had a patent wig of chestnut hair, and wore a long white beard. As he advanced, I thought I smelt an unpleasant odour. My first reaction of disgust was quickly replaced by one of shame. It was cruel of me to show so overtly my repulsion at this being's condition. I stammered out 'Good afternoon!' The

unfortunate creature stood gazing at me with a perfectly blank countenance. I thought the fog was growing thicker in the shop, mercifully dimming the outlines of the monster. As I stood facing him, I had an impulse to wheel about and crash the door between us! But I reminded myself that among the countless little animal figures there were some I simply had to possess. I said, 'I'm very interested in these things.' I pointed to the heterogeneous menagerie on the table nearest to me. 'Can you tell me how prices range?'

He did not speak, but he made noises so inarticulate I thought that the fog must be unduly irritating his lungs. Poor wretch! It was a wonder that such a cripple was alive at all. Before I could proffer assistance he started to spin the table round, so that the little animals would face me. Why did I suddenly catch my breath? Why did I feel like crying out, 'Don't do that!'? I knew—the instant I saw the faces of the little animals.

Each face writhed in agony. No man likes to see a dumb animal suffering. I was so horrified by the pain which the artists had inflicted on small brute features that I could not suppress a cry. I heard myself scream. And then—I woke!

I did not go to sleep again that night. The obscenities of my dream did not permit me. Other factors worried me. Although I woke to find myself lying in bed, I was partly clothed. It is no habit of mine to go to bed partly attired. Supposing the ghastly shop had not been a vision but a squalid truth which had so disturbed my mind that I had suffered from loss of memory? Had I stumbled from the shop after glimpsing nightmare faces, and somehow found my way home in a state of nervous exhaustion?

Supposing the bizarre antique-shop with its insane proprietor existed? A man shaped in such hideous mould might have gathered round him obscure abominations from the world of Oriental art. A dwarfed, twisted brain might seek the company of freak statues among which he would seem less inalienably an outcast. Would it be possible for me to question the hall porter? I could ask him casually if he remembered what time I went out for my walk yesterday. But if I had not gone out, if I had imagined the entire hell, how queerly he would look at me! I do

not like to make myself a figure of fun! And it had been the servant's day off. Moreover, she did not 'sleep in', so it would be impossible for me to find out if I had returned in a distracted state late in the evening. And it would surely have been late, for the dense fog would have made return a protracted business. Even in my bedroom the fog was tiresomely heavy. At least the fog was a concrete metaphor!

I spent the ensuing day on the sofa in my bedroom. I had not the courage to move to my sitting-room, where I would have to see several of my statues of beasties. My servant was alarmed about me. She asked my permission to ring for a doctor. I told her, quite sharply, that I was not amused; and I heard her complaining to herself as she dusted the hall.

But the next day, shaken though I was, I decided on the only measure which might remove unbearable doubt. I set out to retrace my steps. A winter sun was shining when I found the hill which I had climbed in a dream, or in a stupor which led to a dream. It took me longer to reach the teashop, perhaps because my heart had been affected by shock. It was with foreboding that I refound the street . . . found that it really existed. It was with something like despair that I saw there was a curiosity shop in the place where I dreaded to find it. The large bow window was a modern affair and the antiques seemed to be of 'ye olde' brand. It was all very boisterously bright. Still my heart beat loudly, and it took an effort of somewhat hysterical will-power to move close to the window and look in. I realised that if I evaded the issue I would know no peace of mind. Through the pewter mugs and, perhaps, Dresden shepherdesses, I saw the assistant—a young suburban miss with a would-be Kensington air. She was gaily flicking at some bric-a-brac with a feathered apology for a duster. I could see her lips moving, and I felt certain that she was singing an idiotic modern croon to herself. She did not appear a terrifying guardian, so I pulled myself together and entered.

I had not been deceived about her voice; it was a hard-to-bear Kensingtonese. After exchanging conventional formalities, I wondered how I should proceed. I could see no sign of the little figures which had been my undoing on my last visit. Had

those distorted faces been rightly put out of sight? Or . . . I was forming a theory that it must have been at this point that my dream had obscured and substituted its image for the factual chronicle. After a silence, I mumbled that I would like to see some animal figures.

'Oh,' hissed the disappointed maiden, 'but we haven't any demand for that kind of thing. Our customers prefer something useful, like a mug. There are two china cats over there. Would you be wanting china cats? . . . Yes, well, they are a little common. What about this little silver horse? It's not really an antique. It's curious, isn't it? It was made by a city analyst from all the silver deposits he had collected during his professional life in experiments. Most unusual—if you think of the story. It only came into Miss Jordan's hands because she is a relative of the deceased. You'd never get another like it with the same story, would you?'

'But you haven't other animal figures?'

'No, we haven't.'

'Are you certain there aren't others stored away somewhere?' I persisted.

She regarded me in surprise and answered coldly, 'But I should know about our own stock, seeing that I dust it every day. That's the only point on which Miss Jordan and I disagree. She holds that a little dust is good for appearances in a business like this. I hold that dust is dust and microbes are microbes.'

I saw that I would have to buy the right to cross-examine her further. I asked her the price of the silver horse. She squinted archly and named a fancy figure. I nodded. She beamed at me and busied herself wrapping up the odious thing made of chemical drippings. While she was occupied, I picked up a card from a pile. It gave the name and address of the shop. I asked her why it was called Ye Olde Yew Tree Antique Shoppe. She said that she didn't know and that a name was a name, wasn't it? She added, 'I wasn't interested in . . . commerce, till Miss Jordan and I were compelled to go into business when Father died.'

'You are partners?'

'Yes, we run the business ourselves without any outside help.'

She's my sister really; but I refer to her as Miss Jordan to clients because I think it sounds more business-like, don't you?"

I speedily congratulated her and her sister on the success they had made of the shop. I told her I had heard of the place from a friend who had called two afternoons ago. A small man had served him, he told me.

'No man has served in this shop for the last four years,' she told me with hostility. She looked as if I had made an attack on the virginity of the enterprise. 'Besides,' she finished tartly, 'two days ago was Wednesday, and that's an early closing day!'

Feebly I muttered that I must have been confusing two stories. I planked down the money, snatched the immaculate parcel and fled. Relief! The end of my adventure had been a dream which had imposed itself on reality. Probably after striking the window of the antique-shop I had plunged about in the darkness for hours, and arrived home so fagged out that I had built up the fabric of a nightmare. My happiness was complete when, after turning two corners, I was at liberty to hurl the package containing my futile purchase into the gutter. I tried to throw with it the fantasy of the disgusting figures and other mumbo-jumbo of the unconscious.

Alas! I was not to rid myself so easily of the lamentable dealer in antiques whose formless shape had so petrified my soul. I cannot be certain on what plane of existence I ascended the steep hill for the third time; whether in my corporeal body or in some phantasmal projection. For I was to awake again in my bed, half-clothed, with the feeling that somehow the provinces of the conscious and the unconscious mind had overlapped with disastrous results to my sanity. . . .

I thought that it was curiosity which had dragged me back to the street of Ye Olde Yew Tree Antique Shoppe. But as I stood a few paces from the shop in an abrupt revulsion of uncertainty it seemed that there might be baser motives mixed with superficial harmlessness. Was there some morbid fascination which played its part in determining my return to the ill-omened district? For, without premeditation, the thrill of dread returned to me. Why? I had exploded the nightmare of the carved figures of anguish. Why within a few feet of the redoubtable fragment

of Kensingtonese should I be palsied again with fear? Unless I had been working up the sensation in my unconscious—unless I had really returned to capture necropolitic tingles, in the way that seemingly decent folk will cross a street for an accident, although they are aware that the sight will sicken them for days.

A minute afterwards I was able to exonerate myself from baselessness; trotting round the corner of the street came the unspeakable assistant. He was hurrying so fast with his unbalanced weight that I received the impression that he was actually walking on four feet. I could not run away; I seemed to be rooted in my own inhibitions. Although he appeared to be making straight for me, I stood my ground. Indeed he did walk up to me; and he seized my hand. But his hand did not seem like an ordinary hand; it was shapeless and cold. I felt the mechanism of collapse quiver inside me. None the less, there was some urgency in this awful man which made me sustain the terror. He voiced some inexplicable sentiment. I thought he said, 'We haven't much time to lose.' His dreadful hand did not drag me, but it seemed to communicate to me the way I *had* to go. Some force directed me and I walked across the street without any will of my own. I could hear him hobbling beside me; and so ill-adapted was he that his progress seemed to be a tortured hop on three legs. Then to my utter dismay I saw that we were walking into the middle of a blank wall.

For some loathsome reason time seemed to be missing cogs in its machinery. Were we running towards the wall, plunging into it? Perhaps the illusion had something to do with the palpitations of my heart. I once heard a lecturer say that he had experienced a similar sensation after a term of imprisonment. When the potency of the bromide which had regularly been doped into his food to keep him passive had begun to wear off, he had heard his heart speeding up, and had felt the draught of the moments as they swept by him at the new pace. . . . An obsession of mad panic seized me as we rushed, or seemed to rush, towards the wall, that inhuman assistant and I. Nearer and nearer the stone, till the certainty of blinding impact brought doom and a measure of steadiness to my racing brain. . . .

An instant of blank—and then—we were through the wall,

through the row of houses into the square beyond. The physical effect was like that of a motion picture when one image is superimposed behind another and rapidly takes its place; the psychical effect was that of having one's soul stirred inside out, like a rubber glove, and scraped!

The square was large, and a great yew tree stood in the centre. I thought, 'My shroud of white, stuck all with yew'. I felt we were existing in misplaced times for misshapen people. The houses were old, old houses and there were cobble-stones. I thought, and again my thought was a pattern produced by a kaleidoscope of time, 'Oh, prepare it! My shroud of white stuck all with yew.' And the refrain, 'Oh, prepare it!' And the deformity at my side seemed to be trembling with brute fear. His hand, which was more a paw than a hand, pointed under the yew tree. I saw then that a gibbet had been rigged up. Immediately I became conscious of faces—evil and expectant faces of a lustful age. They appeared in my consciousness like flecks of flame in a fire, till the square was thronged.

Then there came a murmur of voices, and I knew that some appalling climax was to be enacted before my eyes. The undecipherable squeaks of dread rung from my companion made me more afraid than any other aspect of the filthy scene. Then there was a shout, and I saw that a man dressed in black with a black mask had stepped onto the platform beneath the scaffold. To intensify the consternation which was welling inside me like an indecent haemorrhage my horrible companion rolled over onto his back and uttered inhuman lamentations.

All at once the crowd seemed to become simultaneously conscious of his behaviour and my presence. They turned to us. Each eye was fixed with savage enjoyment on us. The tongue of the mob was still for an instant; then it burst into a blood-curdling yell. The victims had been found! The yew tree grew taller and greener, the gibbet larger. The man in the black mask pointed at us. I realised that by some subtle process the demons had jostled us nearer the centre of the square. Faces were all around us, barring retreat. And then the hand of the man in black went on stretching and stretching until I thought that it would touch us and we would be lifted onto the gibbet. It was

awesome, watching the black-sleeved arm spread over the sea of faces. And the crowd was howling in a frenzy of anticipation. Were we being moved forward while the arm just pointed? Unless I could resist the last few feet. . . . Then, thank God, I woke up.

Out of the clutches of the sub-human pack! I groaned with relief. But presently my waking thoughts took none too cheering a turn. Why was I again in bed, semi-dressed? Had I really again set out for the hill? If so, at what point was it that my reason toppled over into delirium? I counted my money. I did not seem to have been robbed. Had I found my way home of my own volition? Loss of memory? Accompanied by ravings? If I confided in a doctor the whole wild narrative, might he not look at me askance? Then, after a further consultation in the presence of two friends, might he not 'recommend' a 'home'?

Liberty has always been dear to me; and so, of course, has reason. This sort of thing could not go on; I dreaded a doctor and I dreaded the responsibility of keeping my senses. I decided on a compromise. A very level-headed friend of mine, a sound architect, resided in Staple Inn. He was a man who could be relied upon to take an objective view. Nevertheless, he was not scornful of the ways of dreams, for he was an ardent disciple of Dunne, keeping a diary of his night experiences in order to check whether he might perchance dream of the future or of the unknown past. He was, furthermore, a lover of my brand of London magic, and thus a person to whom I could unburden myself with a sense of kinship.

By luck, I found him in when I called. He was brewing some strong tea and he courteously pressed me to poison myself with a dose of tannin. After several preliminary conversational skirmishes, I admitted that I had come with an object further than that of friendliness. I promised him, though, it was a yarn in his own sphere, and he sat back comfortably to listen to me. At the outset, I was embarrassed; then I felt so glad to be telling my tale, I let my sentences run on without so much as glancing in his direction. When I had finished my weird and jumbled adventures I did venture to look at him, and I thought that his

eyes were animated with interest rather than full of concern for my mental stability.

'I'm so glad you told *me*,' he said. 'Apart from it being a remarkable story, it has a remarkable application.'

I leant forward and put a direct question. 'You don't think I'm mad?'

'I do not,' he answered emphatically. 'And I think I will be able to prove to you that you are not, on account of some specialised knowledge that I possess. But the precise significance of your story—that I may not be able to tell you. There are some diversions which make its symbolism doubtful—some really amazing twists. You, though, may be able to elucidate yourself when I have made you aware of the facts I know. To begin with, there was a very famous Yew Tree Square, or rather infamous, for the place had an evil repute. My researches on the subject of town-planning brought me into contact with the Yew Tree Square legends; it was a place of execution, and has long been demolished. There was also a Yew Tree Shop which got itself a bad name; it was a species of general store of its day, and was kept by a vagabond called Chiffonier. The disturbing point is that both shop and square are within easy distance of my rooms, miles from the part of London where you had your nasty adventures.'

'Then why——?' I began.

'You'll have to ask a psychic for the interpretation,' he replied. 'I can only give you an account of the dirty bit of history which I came across in consulting records about the square. When I have told you everything, you may be able to supply the missing links; you may find, after all, that your dreams have some reference as warning or prophecy to facts with which you are acquainted.'

'You know that at one time animals were brought into a court of law and tried for their sins? If there was a plague of rats, for instance, a rodent would be brought into court where he would be defended by an appointed lawyer. You cannot imagine the amount of forensic nonsense that was babbled both for the defence and the prosecution. Trials would be drawn out for days by ludicrous quibbles.'

'A characteristic specimen of twaddle and illogical inference is a point that was solemnly presented by one of the attorneys for the defence. He excused the default of non-appearance of his clients (the rats) on the ground of the length and difficulty of the journey and the serious perils which attended it, owing to the unwearied vigilance of their mortal enemies, the cats, who watched all their movements and with fell intent lay in wait for them at every corner and passage. He addressed the court at some length, in order to show that if a person be cited to appear at a place to which he cannot come with safety, he may exercise the right of appeal and refuse to obey the writ, even though such appeal be expressly precluded in the summons.

'If the rodents lost their cause, which they almost invariably did, a representative was put to death and the whole tribe excommunicated. Sometimes it was urged that the vermin were creatures of God, and had been sent to try men for their sins; then perhaps they were only adjured to migrate to the next village (for the people of that day had no thought for their neighbours) and the parishioners were exhorted to mend their ways and fill the church coffers with tithes. On the other hand, the prosecution might waive aside this plea for abstinence from anathema, declaring that rats were not among the animals included by Noah in his Ark, but were created by the witchcraft of men from slime as the basilisk was created from the egg of a cock—

'Yes, I do seem to be meandering; but I have sketched in these details to give you a background for the mediæval mind and the attitude of the old courts to animals—

'Beasts were allowed in the witness box. It was a bad day for a man charged with theft if the dog of the rifled household barked at him! And an animal which had killed or injured a human had to stand trial. To the sins of a pig which had devoured a baby was added the accusation that it had done so on a Friday. Ridiculous? I grant you; but dark and frightening, too, for it leads one to understand the narrow minds and customs of those people whose superstition and ignorance led them to behave in a manner that now seems no better than that of the brute they judged. An animal might even be submitted

to the rack to force a confession. Once condemned to public execution, the beast might be subjected to capricious and supererogatory acts of cruelty by the hangman. The executioner cut off the feet of a mule that was inclined to kick before consigning it to the flames, merely as a matter of personal convenience. The public execution would, of course, be vastly enjoyed by the rabble; the executioner would be allowed to add to his list of expenses the cost of a pair of gloves so that he need not soil his hands when dealing with his dumb victim. As if the touch of humans who indulged in such practices was not rank contamination!

'This is horrible, absolutely horrible! Could people really have behaved like this? Is all this true?'

'Yes. You can examine the old records in the British Museum if you have the desire. Unfortunately people don't seem to have improved. They are still behaving in much the same way in certain parts of Europe, only now they seem to concentrate on being cruel to one another. But I did not tell you all this merely to harrow you. A favourite place for the execution of animals was—Yew Tree Court!'

'Then the pain on the faces of the little statues——'

'It seems like it,' he broke in. 'But there is a special story about Chiffonier. He was detected in a peculiarly repellent crime. Before he could be apprehended, he made good his escape, leaving his shop and chattels as spoils for the authorities. The only living thing Chiffonier left behind, for he rode away on his horse, was a pig. The animal was tried in his master's place. Now—here comes the worst part—the pig was clad in a tight suit of flesh-coloured cere-cloth, resembling in tint the human skin, and adorned with a chestnut brown wig and a long, whitish beard. It was rigged up in its master's garments. Then the snout of the beast was cut off and a mask of Chiffonier's features substituted for it. This awful counterfeit presentment was publicly hanged.'

'Good God! the assistant——'

'Yes, it seems like it.'

'But why,' I demanded '——why, why should I have to meet

this ghastly pig in a dream-shop? Why should all this have happened to me?"

He regarded me keenly. 'You can't find any analogy in your mind?'

'None.'

'Well,' he mused, 'it sounds too elaborate a vision to be taken as a psychic hint that you ought to devote the rest of your days to the prevention of cruelty to animals. You so easily might have taken your dreams to a doctor, and then been "restrained" for the rest of your mortal term! No, it's probably just chance. You hit a moment when (or should I say where?) things have worn thin on the surface; because you were in some rapport, maybe your love of animal figures, you got sucked through a crack in time. Because most of the circumstances in this case are undoubtedly psychic—invisible to us—how can we say what knot of facts came into "opposition" on the other side? Weren't you explaining to me, last time I met you, some theory about Existence as an Organism which might also account for a fluke like yours?'

'It's easy to talk about things which aren't fakes because they have a technique.' I shrugged my shoulders hopelessly. 'But flukes . . . they, just happen; how can one discuss them? What can I do about it? Now I suspect the history behind the phantasy, I'm less anxious to fall again through any crack of time——'

He was silent for a time. After he had reflected, he said, 'You're a pal, and I'll put forward a scheme; at that, it isn't completely disinterested. I'll admit that your case seems to me to be unique, hence worthy of first-hand observation. A friend of mine is travelling abroad and has left the keys of the house with me. I informed him that I was thinking of having my rooms redecorated; and he thought I might like to stay at his place while the whitewashers are industrious. It's a large house and we could stay there together snugly. Supposing you shut up your shack and camp out with me for a bit? You'd have the satisfaction of knowing that if you immerse yourself in any more supernatural jams I'll be at hand to pull you out. What do you say?'

I spent two peaceful months with my architect friend in the loaned house, which was commodious and equipped with more domestic luxuries than I can afford to give myself. I was sorry to leave. However, at the end of two tranquil months I felt reassured enough to resume solitary life. Whatever had happened to me, it seemed to have ceased happening. If it had been a crack of time which had opened, it appeared decorously to have closed. If it had been a nerve-storm, the danger seemed to have blown over. Besides, I could not help noticing that my architect friend, now that my life had resumed its norm, felt relieved of responsibility and, I think, a little bored by my constant company. It was of course human of him to be somewhat disappointed that nothing further of a spectacular nature happened.

Two years slipped by, and I added some choice morsels to my collection of animal figures. There were no more rendezvous in the Yew Tree country. I cannot say I completely forgot the gruesome episodes, but they did not dominate my consciousness in any way. I was occasionally reminded of my dreams by some *trivia*, as a man may be reminded of some unnerving prose he has read. Certainly it never suggested itself to me that what had happened was but a prelude to a reality more lacerating, more fiendish than any nightmare bag of tricks.

So, three years later, when I found myself at the foot of the steep hill, I innocently thought, 'The time has come to lay the bogey once and for all. I'll make my walk up the hill and possibly pop in at the old shop.'

As I trudged the memorable street, I felt three years older. When I finally reached the top, I was puffing and blowing like a confirmed old-timer. The arty tea-shop seemed a haven of rest. I thought that I would patronise its peasant ware, not from any greed of wee and indigestible home-made cakes, but because I welcomed the opportunity to regain composure, lolling in the wickerwork with my face screened by an antediluvian number of 'Punch'.

As I loitered with uneaten crumpets and unlaughed-at jokes, fog started to swirl outside the plate glass. I looked up in order to retrieve a spoon which I had brushed from the table, and I

saw it swaying sinuously. Ominous signal! I called for my bill. This time there did seem to be something miraculous about the way the fog had materialised!

Before I could scamper down the hill, as fast as old legs could take me, I had a reflex of rebellion. My nature is not so sturdy, and I believe that the gesture of defiance was imposed on me. That 'muddled thinking' of the fog once more! Or was it that I was caught by some trap of repetition that I just had to try to repeat experience? At any rate, I found myself saying to myself 'if you'll just walk by the shop in fog, you'll be free for all eternity from goblins. To establish your self-possession won't take a couple of minutes.'

But something misfired. Instead of finding myself in the street of Ye Olde Antique Shoppe, I entered the parallel street—one that approximately occupied the position taken by Yew Tree Square in my vision. With a repetition of magic, the fog started to settle my hash. I could see nothing; then a blur of lights above my head. Salvation! A cinema, I thought. I could go in there and at least be with human beings. It was not a cinema but a music-hall. Well, I hadn't been to a music-hall since I was a kid. It might take my mind off—other matters! I procured my *fauteuil* and went in. It was still early for the first house and the auditorium reminded me of a mausoleum. I wondered how many people would turn up in the fog. Would those artistes who were not already in their dressing rooms be able to arrive? What did it matter if I was giving the slip to psychic fuss?

Notwithstanding, a young couple came and sat in front of me a second later. The boy said, 'Ye can't see yer hand behind yer face.' The girl giggled. 'Alf! You are a one!' They kept up puerile back-chat for a bit; then even they became cowed by the emptiness of the gloomy theatre. They sat together huddled in silence. At length someone switched on lights in the chandelier in the dome. Then a pianist, a drummer, two violinists and a cornet-player took their places in the orchestra pit, leaving many vacant music-stands. The conductor jogged out at the last moment and flipped his baton with the air of a musician

who can't be expected to 'do his best' for an empty house. The overture was a high-point of the dismal.

The first turn was a troupe of performing dogs; they did everything but cry their hearts out on the stage. A comedian followed. Had the dogs been normal pups, they would have re-invaded the stage and torn the mournful knave bone from bone. The next 'spot' was a woman who sang songs at the piano; as she could neither play nor sing it did not seem to matter very much what she thought she was doing. The last turn for the first half was a deputy for two other numbers which had lost their way in the fog—an old gentleman riding a miscellany of bicycles. In an age of aeroplanes it seemed rather inapt. Interval! I sought the bar, feeling I had a genuine excuse for stimulus. I left the young couple cradled in gloom.

I was the first customer. The barmaid was too true to be bad. A great spiders' lounge of hair was heaped on top of her ancient cranium. She revived when I ordered a double whisky. 'Ave you come far?'

'Yes,' I said. 'What news of the fog?'

'Ho! It's liftin'. By the time this 'ouse is over you'll be able to get 'ome without too much sweat. I suppose you came to see the h'illusionist? I 'ear 'e's a wonder. Want ter see 'im myself. Being Monday night, we ain't none of us seen 'im yet. And 'e wasn't able to get 'ere for rehearsals. And that's a queer story—'

Another unhappy man came in and took his place besides me. Evidently he was an habitué, for they greeted each other raucously; and she switched her queer story to him. The illusionist had been in a pretty bad train-smash on Saturday. His manager had sent a wire that he would not be able to appear. But he had astonished everybody by rising from his bed on Monday morning and turning up at the theatre 'as cool as a cucumber'. His property and scenery had, of course, come on by goods train. His assistants had suggested giving the show by themselves for they knew all the dodges. The management of the music-hall had hoped to bluff it out somehow. Then the boss had arrived in person, in a vile temper, but ready to present his stunts.

'My, everywhere 'e's cleaned up wherever 'e's played. Fair treat, they say it is. Saws a woman in 'alf, and h'al that kind of thing.'

My fellow drinker said that he had read in the Sunday papers about the train-smash, but he never thought that he would be mixed up in it anyway, so to speak.

I tossed back my drink and sauntered out into the passage. I explored till I came to an exit of the push-door-to-open brigade. I pushed. The fog was certainly clearing; but it would obviously be better to wait another hour. Anyway, there is a juvenile appeal about conjuring which makes it less of an effort to behold than more pretentious 'spectacles'. I shut the exit and went back to my seat. The young couple were almost asleep, and the orchestra were mercifully halfway through a selection.

To the-roll of drums the curtains parted. The cornet-player tried to do something Eastern, which I imagine had been written for a flute. The violins made a job of wailing. The scene was covered with fantastic figures of Egyptian religion; animal-headed gods in yellow and orange; curtains in black and green. A great cauldron emitted a column of vapour, reflecting a coloured flame below, whose tint slowly changed through some clever mechanical device.

Robed as an Egyptian priest, the illusionist stepped from behind curtains at the back of the stage. It was rather ludicrous. He was a short man with pig-eyes. The couple in front of me tittered. But the conjuror stepped forward to the footlights. With an insolence that was alarming he gazed at the empty house. One knew then that he was a man of power and I did not feel it was a good man's power. The girl in front of me shivered, and the boy looked quickly behind him, as if he were reassuring himself that there were other mortals who could be summoned to his aid in case of some undreamed of emergency. Before he turned his head, I saw that he was biting his lips. Pig-eyes had subdued the house. He stood still for some minutes, to let us all see that he was—master. Then he clapped his hands and the light from the cauldron changed to green. In the sickly glow, a girl was dragged on to the stage by two slaves. The girl

was a radiant beauty, dressed, or undressed, as a princess. The illusionist signed to the conductor. The music ceased.

'The Princess,' said the magician, 'has offended. She must pay the penalty of swords. But because she is of a Royal House she shall not feel any pain. First she shall be hypnotised so that she will not know the way she dies.'

His voice was high-pitched; but for some reason nobody felt like sniggering. He waved to the orchestra, who patiently recommenced their dirge. He walked over to the girl, and stared at her. I could have sworn that she flinched under his pig-eyes. He put out his hand, grasping her shoulder. Again I felt certain that the girl's body really did tauten. Meanwhile, a negro, with greased and shining torso, wheeled a tall instrument across the stage. It was made so that the body of the girl could be strapped within its cage. The slaves led the girl to this apparatus. They lashed her to the framework, then swung over and bolted a basket door. Her head, and her legs from the knees downwards were visible to the audience. The light from the cauldron changed from green to red.

A second negro carried a bag in which were sheathed six rapiers. The man at the drums attempted a fanfare. The illusionist chose one sword and twanged the glistening steel. It looked like the real thing. He took his sight along the blade. He aimed for the heart of the Princess and lunged at the basket contraption. A frightful shudder convulsed the face of the girl, who up till now, had seemed to be in a deep trance. The slaves turned the instrument of torture, which was mounted on four legs with castors, so that the audience could see the sword, dark with blood, apparently passing through the body of the girl. The magician seized another sword, and then another. The relish with which he thrust the poignards in was outrageous. I thought, 'This is an act which ought to be censored.' Then I remembered the accident; perhaps he was just feeling at war with life and was letting off steam. Still, on the stage, the performance was salacious.

The light turned from red to soft white. We saw then appearing from under the basket, smearing down the girl's legs, what might have been blood. The shoulders of the young

woman in front of me heaved. I believe she vomited into her handkerchief. The boy whispered, 'Let's get out, for Gawd's sake.' Supporting her with his hand under her arm-pit, he led her away.

For the second time the illusionist approached the foot-lights and glared at the house. He tottered as if he felt suddenly ill; then he recovered himself. The conductor stopped his music. The two slaves wheeled the awful human pin-cushion to the rear of the stage. The Princess's blood seemed to be flowing more freely now, leaving a trail of viscous liquid across the boards. The man said, 'We will leave her there for the present. Later I will show you whether she is injured or not.' He leered and I heard a woman scream.

But Pig-face dominated the handful of spectators. He said, 'The handmaiden of the Princess has also offended. For her there will be no pity.' The negroes wheeled a table on to the stage. I saw with a sinking feeling that many straps were arranged on it. The light changed to amber. The magician clapped his hands. A new mournful tune was launched by the orchestra. The self-elected Egyptian priest awaited his victim. But the handmaiden did not appear. I saw the magician mutter to himself. He put his hand to his temple and swayed. The light turned to a green mist. He stepped into the wings and drew on to the stage, by the wrist, a girl who was trembling. Either it was a magnificent piece of acting or the girl really did want to escape. She flayed out her hands. But she was a mite of a thing, and could only hit him impotently. His eyes seemed to blaze in the green light. He had the girl's arm behind her back. One negro, with a shamed face, shuffled forward to help. Then the girl was lost, bound to the table in a spread-eagle. The light changed slowly to a cloudy purple.

Again the magician stepped into the wings. He came back with an immense saw. For a minute I thought 'What an anachronism! Such a great new saw. So out of keeping with his act.' Then I thought 'Something is wrong.' Above the music I could hear the girl groaning. Then . . . something clicked in my mind. I leant forward and picked up the programme which the young couple had left behind them——

I don't know how psychic experts would explain the sequence of dream and event, but it now seemed clear to me that my dream had been sent to avert an atrocity. Men torturing beasts—and—a man with pig-eyes, turned into a beast by an accident, injured in the head, no doubt, torturing men. The face of the girl strapped to the table was anguished as one of the carved beasts of my dream. The spiritualists would say that it was a case of reincarnation—for the programme read 'The Great Chiffonier, Illusionist'.

At last I understood why the execution in Yew Tree Square had seemed to take place in the very street where the music-hall stood. But I had understood too late. As I jumped from my seat with a cry of 'Stop that man!' the saw was already rasping across flesh and bone and hideous shriek after shriek filled the empty theatre.

THE LAST TRIP

ARCHIE BINNS

THE driver congratulated himself on having only one more trip to make that night. It was nearly 11.30 when he brought the long-backed car up to the bus station on Pacific Street and let his passengers out. When he got back to Lewis he would turn in for the night. And it was high time.

A group of men stood waiting at the edge of the curb and almost as soon as the bus had been emptied it was full again. Butler looked around. Eight men occupied the eight places in the tonneau.

'One more for the emergency seat and we're off,' he thought. And while he was thinking it, the ninth man came to the curb and took the seat beside him.

'That's the way to get passengers,' he told himself as he took up the fares. 'Just the right number and no waiting.' It was something that had never happened in his long experience as a driver.

In less than a minute after arriving, he was jockeying the long-backed bus out through the traffic. He climbed the H. Street hill, gathered speed on the lever and slipped into the overdrive without disturbing the clutch.

It was a dark, windless night, and there was nothing to see but the pool of headlights on the road. In the darkened tonneau eight passengers sat like shadows without speaking, nodding slightly with the motion of the car. Beside the driver, the ninth man looked steadily and silently into the darkness. Butler was annoyed.

'Anyone would think I was driving them to a funeral,' he thought.

The light of the last house slipped by and they rushed on between the dark walls of scrub pines that bordered the road. And no one had spoken a word.

'What a gang of passengers,' he breathed to himself.

Suddenly the buzzer vibrated through the silence. And for some reason the man at the wheel started.

'Driver, I want to get out here,' a voice called from the darkness of the tonneau.

Obediently he put his feet on the pedals and brought the bus to a full stop with the handbrake. A man climbed out and disappeared into the darkness.

'The devil!' the driver thought as he started on. 'I never saw a cross-road here!'

Again the big car whined along on the overdrive. And not a word had been spoken except by the man who got out. A nice party!

Three minutes later the buzzer broke through the silence.

'Driver!'

Again his feet reached for the pedals.

'I want to get out here.'

The car came to a stop, a man got out, closed the door, and they rolled on.

'Is there any place for that man to go?' Butler wondered. 'Anyway, it was too dark for him to see where we were.'

A small car, travelling rapidly, hummed by. And in some way it gave him a feeling of relief. He glanced back. In the moment of light he saw six remaining passengers in the tonneau, sitting like so many shadows, nodding with the motion of the bus. When the other car had passed, the night and the road seemed darker and uglier than before.

Hardly a minute later he started again at the harsh noise of the buzzer.

'Driver, I want to get out here.'

The same voice and the same blackness of scrub pines. As the man got out, the driver put his head into the darkness and

looked about. There might or might not have been some trail through the woods. He could not see.

He used the throttle a little more.

'It may be some game they are up to,' he told himself. 'But if they want to rob me, why do they get out before they have their money's worth out of their fares?'

Now the bus was fairly swallowing up the road.

'Half an hour more of this and we're—'

'B-r-r-r. The buzzer again.'

'Driver, I want to get out here.'

Butler did not put out his head to look this time. It seemed safer not to. Besides, he knew that there was no cross-road of any kind. Out of the corner of his eye he glanced at the man beside him in the emergency seat.

'Is he in this, too?' the driver wondered. 'Why can't he say something?'

But the fellow was still looking out into the darkness, without ever having moved his head.

'What a cursed, black road,' he muttered inside his chest. When the buzzer growled again he started violently because he had been listening tensely.

'Driver, I want to get out here,' he mimicked to himself. And his skin prickled all over when the words were repeated, in exactly the same tone, from the darkened tonneau.

The fifth man got out. Butler drove on and did not look around. Without being fully conscious of it, he was driving faster than he had ever driven before. The lightened car rocked as it plunged on over the road.

'Why is it that the fewer there are, the more scared I am?' he wondered.

He listened intently for the buzzer, nearly starting out of his seat at the first harsh vibration.

'Driver, I want to get out here.'

And the sixth man disappeared into the blackness of the pines, where there was neither house nor trail. The two remaining men at the back of the car were silent as shadows. In the emergency seat the other man had never moved nor turned his head.

'I wish we could meet some more cars,' the driver thought. He put on the brakes as the buzzer snarled again.

'Driver, I want to get out here.'

The repeated sound of the buzzer and the voice was maddening. Again he stopped between the ugly walls of the darkness, letting the seventh passenger out.

'Seven from nine makes two,' he told himself as the bus lunged on. 'If they start anything, I might be able to handle the two of them. If only the one beside me would turn around, or get out, or say something!'

And the long car shot rocking through the darkness, with only the driver and the one shadow in the great tonneau and the man who was looking intently into the blackness of the pines and the night. Butler gripped the wheel and felt his hair prickling on his head. The one in the back was moving about. Perhaps he was reaching for the——

'B-r-r-r.'

The buzzer seemed attached to his nerves, racking them with its harsh vibrations.

'Driver, I want to get out here.'

It was spoken in the tone the others had used. But each time it was repeated it became more hateful and uncanny.

He let the eighth man out.

'Good night.'

'What?' the driver exclaimed. The two words had startled him unbelievably.

The door had no sooner closed on the empty tonneau than the car was in motion again. Why had he started so when the man said 'Good-night'? Passengers often did that. But spoken by the last of the eight, the words seemed to have a strange meaning.

'Eight from nine makes one,' he reassured himself, slipping into the overdrive again. 'But what is the one, and what is he up to?'

As if in answer, the man in the emergency seat took a deep breath, like a sigh, and turned from studying the darkness. It was a face that the driver had never seen before, smooth and

pale, with dark, luminous eyes. The man folded his arms over his breast and spoke for the first time.

'How far is it to the Woodland Cemetery?'

Butler started violently and pressed the throttle.

'Five miles.' Then added: 'We're having a nice ride, aren't we?'

The passenger laughed.

'Ha! Ha! You are driving fast, Mr. Butler.'

He flinched at the weird sound of the laughter, mingled with the rush of the car; and the mention of his name made him tremble, because he felt that he must do or say something. 'Well, better introduce yourself, since we are riding together.'

'If you wish,' was the cool reply. 'My name is Death.'

'I didn't quite get it.'

'Death!'

The bus driver put his feet on the pedals.

'This has gone far enough to suit me,' he thought.

'Better not,' the man beside him remarked. 'Do you see anything under my elbow?'

In the dim light that was shed from the instrument board he made out the muzzle of an automatic pistol, protruding slightly from under folded arms.

'As you like,' he agreed. 'Where were we? Your name is Death, I believe. I suppose that is why you are going to the cemetery?'

'Exactly, that is why we are going to the cemetery.'

The driver felt a horrible chill coming over him.

'We? I didn't know I was invited.'

'You were invited when I planned this ride.'

'So you planned it, eh, with the others getting out along the road?'

'Exactly, so that we could go alone.'

The passenger began tapping on the footboards with his feet, keeping time with the swaying car. Butler tightened his grip on the wheel, shivering and snarling like an animal in a cage.

'If you are Mister Death, then it's the cemetery for you. But you might tell what's the idea of taking me along. By God!' he burst out, 'If you carried a scythe, as you are supposed to,

instead of that pistol, I would take a chance on seeing if we both went there!'

'Death has tricked people before,' the passenger observed coolly. 'And hadn't you better think a minute and see if there isn't a reason for your going there?'

'What the devil are you driving at? What have I done?'

'You should remember.'

'Remember what?'

The driver's heart pounded so that he could hear it above the roar of the motor; and the car that raced over the road seemed to be standing still in the horrible darkness.

'So you don't remember?'

'No. What is it?'

'How far is it to the cemetery now?'

'About three miles. Why?'

'And still you don't remember?'

'No. Who the devil are you?'

'You have forgotten?' the passenger cried, his eyes shining like those of a cat. 'God, I wish I could forget! And you don't even remember!'

'But what is it I don't remember?'

'Listen. When you were a bus driver here in 1918 did you once crowd a woman's car into a ditch?'

'What is that to you?'

'So you did?'

'Yes,' the driver admitted sullenly. 'What is that to you?'

'What happened to that woman?'

'The car turned over and she died. But who—what was she to you?'

'Everything!'

The passenger stared with mad intentness. Then he continued, 'I would have died long ago if it hadn't been for her. I was blown up and shot to pieces. But I wouldn't die. Then, when I was ready to come home, I heard that you had killed her.'

'But it wasn't my fault, I had to keep on schedule. That day—'

He turned his face away from the wild unnatural light in the man's eyes. Before him there rose the scene that he had never

let himself think of since the day it happened; the crowded bus tearing over the road to make up time, the grey roadster pushed to the edge of the ditch by the heavier vehicle, the gasp of the passengers, followed by a shriek that went up and up as the small car turned over and crumpled, the bus sliding to a stop with smoking brakes, the white-faced passengers crowding round, the delicate, drooping face of the girl, and the blood —blood all over her white dress! The driver pressed the throttle as far down as it would go, trying to get away from the fearful picture.

'So you killed us both. It was too much to stand. They brought back what was left of me and put me away. I waited my chance until tonight, when I came to find you.'

Still the picture floated before his eyes, while the shrieking pierced him through. And this madman or ghost was making him remember every detail.

'How far is it to the cemetery now?'

'A mile,' Butler said between chattering teeth.

'Good. We shall be in time.'

The bus lumbered swiftly down the hill, through the valley and roared up the other slope, with the passenger beating time to the rhythm. As he neared the crest, the driver saw a faint light in the sky. Soon they would be on the open flat, in sight of the cemetery.

'Quick, how far is it now?'

'A quarter of a mile.'

His staring eyes were ready to burst and the hair bristled up on his head. The drooping face, the blood all over the white dress, and the shrieking, filled his eyes and ears.

'If I can only get past without stopping,' he said to himself.

The black iron fence came in sight; the dim gravestones flitted by like ghosts. Just ahead, at the bend in the highway, the dark gateway of the cemetery rose against the sky. If he kept on the road at that turn, he would be safe in sight of the lights of the town.

Butler winced fearfully as the car rocked over an unevenness of the road. The dark arch of the gateway seemed to draw his eyes toward it, like a magnet.

'We are here!' the passenger cried, rising in his seat.

The wheel twisted in the driver's hands, and the long-backed car careened and banked sharply. Then it plunged toward the cemetery where the white gravestones stood waiting, row after row, like ghosts, to welcome his arrival.

One side of the stone entrance leaped up before the car. And at the moment of the crash that sounded to the sky, there was a wild triumphant burst of laughter, either from the mad passenger—or from the dead who were waiting.

Arrow Thrillers

DRACULA

Bram Stoker

THE LAIR OF THE WHITE WORM

Bram Stoker

NOT AT NIGHT

Christine Campbell Thomson (ed.)

TO THE DEVIL—A DAUGHTER

Dennis Wheatley

THE EUNUCH OF STAMBOUL

Dennis Wheatley

HELL IS A CITY

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